



August 2019

Seeing God in a New Light

Readings, Reflections, Prayers
from Revelation (2)
1 & 2 Thessalonians

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Monday, July 29: Revelation 13:1-10 (and Daniel 7, if you want the background)

John was writing to persecuted Christians in the 1st century. Most of these believers had a Jewish heritage. One of the favourite passages of 1st century Jews – suffering under Roman occupation – was Daniel 7, a passage written to encourage the Jewish exiles in Babylon. Daniel 7 speaks of four monsters coming up out of the sea (a symbol of chaos and evil in Old Testament prophecy): a winged lion, a bear with three tusks in its mouth, a leopard with four wings and four heads, and finally an even more terrifying beast with iron teeth, bronze claws, ten horns, and another smaller horn. It's the stuff of nightmares.

In Daniel the interpretation is quite clear. These four beasts represent four nasty kingdoms or empires, of which the fourth will be particularly evil. The horns represent rulers, the last of whom will make war against God's people and blaspheme against God Himself. Then the "ancient of Days" – God – comes, judges the great monster, and takes its power, giving it to "the son of man" who is given everlasting power and dominion.

Knowing this Old Testament background, which was very familiar to John's readers, does Revelation 13 make more sense? The Roman Empire held virtually the entire known world under servitude at sword point. Roman emperors declared themselves gods, built temples for themselves, and demanded everyone worship their images. Thus, in Revelation 2, John describes Pergamum – the centre of emperor worship in Asia – as the place "where Satan has his throne." The Romans could kill any who refused. For Christians who could not in good conscience offer sacrifices to Caesar as a god, times were tough. Believers had a choice: convert or die.

If John were to write: "Rome is like a beast ..." He would be killed. Anyone who read his writings would be killed. So he says, "Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand ..." (13:9): John uses code – Old Testament language – to share his insight. People who knew Daniel 7 – Jewish background people/not-Romans – know exactly who John is talking about. This is Rome.¹ This is reality in many parts of the world today ... "God's holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful," says John (13:10). Hard words to hear and live out in John's day. Hard words to hear and live out in Syria, North Africa, or China today.

Peter, also writing to churches in Asia, comments: "Through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting him will be the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:3-9).

Pray for patience and faithfulness for Christians around the world suffering for their faith. And pray that – as we go through our trials (whether they be family problems, health issues, employment/financial challenges, etc.) that we would know the hope, joy, and peace that comes through knowing Jesus as our Saviour ...

*Unclutter our lives, Lord, we have too much,
consume too much, expect too much.
Grant us perspective:
to see this world through others' eyes than just our own.
Grant us compassion:
where there is need to play our part, not turn aside.
Grant us gratitude:
for what we have, our daily bread, the gift of life.
Unclutter our lives, Lord, give us space,
simplicity, thankful hearts. Amen*

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¹ Note the almost fatal injury in 13:3. After the corrupt Nero died (who brutally persecuted Christians and burnt much of Rome to the ground), it looked like the empire was done. Four would-be emperors fought over Rome. Titus, who eventually emerged from the chaos as emperor, was stronger – and more vicious – than any before. He is the one who destroyed Jerusalem and burned the Temple in 70 AD. This was still very fresh in John's (and his readers') memory. To Jews – and Jewish Christians – Titus was worst of all.

Tuesday, July 30: Revelation 13:11-18

A little bit of background is helpful here: Nero – the first emperor to officially persecute Christians died in 68 AD. Romans loved him. A tradition persisted that he would come back to life again. Many Roman emperors presented themselves as a reincarnation of Nero. By John's time, emperors were building temples and images of themselves – as gods – throughout the empire. Loyal Roman subjects were expected to worship them.

In John's day, engineers were clever at making statues appear to come alive and even seem to speak with a series of gears and pulleys. A whole science of "theurgy" – making statues appear to be alive, had emerged (look it up online). Many people – awed by the architecture, sculpture, and apparent "life" of the emperors' temples – were quite convinced that these rulers were really gods.

And we have the enigmatic "666." Of course, people through the ages have identified this person with the Pope or Martin Luther (depending on your side in the Reformation), Stalin, Hitler, certain biblical scholars, labour unions, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, even Barney the purple dinosaur. In the ancient world, letters were used as numbers (think of Roman numerals). When you spell "Nero Caesar" in **Hebrew**, the number-letters come out 666. John is again speaking in code that his **Jewish**-background readers would understand.²

Christians wouldn't worship Caesar as a god.³ Very often they were killed. But even if they could avoid worship the emperor, it was difficult to be faithful to God. Roman coins were stamped with words like "Son of God" below the emperor's image – should you use them? The best time to make money as a businessman was during Roman religious festivals – should you sell trinkets of the gods and the emperor? Being part of a guild (required of tradespeople) included participating in emperor worship – what do you do? Can you buy and eat a slab of beef knowing it was probably offered as a sacrifice at a pagan temple?

Today ... does it matter if the company I work for has a terrible environmental record (the environment is God's creation)? Should I be concerned if the mutual funds in which I have invested have shares of companies that abuse human rights? Am I concerned that the clothes I buy are made in sweatshops by people in sub-human conditions? Should I buy fair-trade coffee? These may not be the most important questions we face in life, but they make us think about how – perhaps unwittingly – we buy into corrupt systems, too.

Another issue that comes out in these passages is the subtle cult of person-worship. We are obsessed with celebrities and politicians: when they speak, we listen, and allow their opinions to become our opinions (after all they are rich and famous). We uncritically listen to their speeches/songs/writings/talks and assume that they are really smart people. Is that wise? Is that healthy? How can we make sure we listen to God first of all?

*Life is a struggle, Lord.
Time plays its tricks on body, mind and spirit.
Simple tasks that in my youth would have taken minutes
now consume my waking moments, exhausting, frustrating, depressing.*

*Life is a struggle, Lord.
Technology confuses, so little now makes sense.
Age strips the brain of sharpness that once would have found words appropriate
but now struggles, understanding, responding, and coping.*

*Life is a struggle, Lord.
You alone are my constancy, all I cling to.
Accept my mustard seed of faith, and the simple words I offer,
my sacrifice of prayer. Amen*

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² The number of perfection in Jewish numerology is 3-7's: 777. 666 reveals Roman emperor-worship for what it is – a human (one less than perfection) parody of the real thing. The number for people is "6" in the Jewish system so "666" is also about people-worship.

³ Think back to the Old Testament again – the Scripture so familiar to most early Christians. Where does the worship of an image show up as an issue? Daniel 3. Nebuchadnezzar set up an image that all people were required to worship, but Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would not do it. They were thrown into a furnace. God, of course, protected them. But John seems to be warning his contemporaries that such physical deliverance might not happen this time ...

Wednesday, July 31: Revelation 14:1-5

In John 10:1-5, Jesus says, *"I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber. But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. After he has gathered his own flock, he walks ahead of them, and they follow him because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don't know his voice."*

Jesus – the Shepherd who is also the Lamb – leads His people and they follow Him wherever He goes (Revelation 14:4). This is a call to follow Jesus faithfully every moment of every day with a laser-like focus.⁴

In John's gospel, one of the most important phrases is *"following Jesus"* – in fact this is how John defines people who say they believe in Jesus. Do they actually follow? *"Anyone who wants to serve me must follow me, because my servants must be where I am,"* Jesus says in John 12:26.

Peter promises he will follow Jesus come hell or high water – literally come prison or death (John 13:37). But when the moment of truth comes, Peter denies even knowing Jesus. After Jesus' resurrection, in a wonderful picture of forgiveness and restoration, Jesus opens His heart to Peter – imperfect as Peter is – with a renewed invitation to *"Follow me"* (John 21:19). Peter is called to try, try again (I like Peter ☺).

Where are we in this passage? We are part of that choir, part of that army, part of that signed-sealed-delivered company of people who follow the Lamb/Shepherd/Jesus. If we put our faith in Him, there is no doubt about our salvation. We are safe in His fold. *"I am the good shepherd,"* Jesus says. *"I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep"* (John 10:14-15). We are as intimately connected to Jesus as He is to His Father. Nothing and no one can take us out of His hands (see also Romans 8:28-39).

Are we perfect? No, in reality we are far from it. But because of Jesus' death and resurrection – which paid the price for all our sin – we are completely forgiven and restored, just as Peter was. We are not "good" or saved because we made ourselves perfect by our own efforts or self-discipline. We *"have been purchased from among the people on the earth as a special offering to God and to the Lamb"* (14:4). Jesus has done it all. Through Jesus' grace we are made pure (14:4). Through Jesus' forgiveness we are without blame (14:5).

Are there things in your life He needs to deal with? Bring them to Him. Allow Him to forgive you.

"As for you," Jesus said to Peter, *"follow me"* (John 21:22). He says the same to each of us: *"As for you _____ (fill in your name), follow me."* Where is He leading? Where is He calling you to follow?

*Your light is the only light I need,
as I travel through life's mystery .
Your word the only voice I hear,
that still small voice that leads me
to the place where I should be.
Your presence is the only company I need,
as I walk this narrow road.
Your fellowship the warmth I crave,
to help me on my way.
Amen*

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⁴ More modern translations helpfully translate the rest of 14:4 as *"They have kept themselves as pure as virgins."* In Ancient Israel, when war was necessary to defend God's people, it was seen as a holy enterprise and – among other purification rituals – soldiers were to abstain from sexual relations for a time before battle. This was a temporary – not a permanent – celibacy, to help the soldiers focus on the task at hand. Revelation is not anti-marriage or anti-sex-within marriage (marriage and sex are among God's good gifts). John is drawing on this Jewish tradition of pre-battle focus and single-minded commitment to help us focus on the task at hand.

Thursday, August 1: Revelation 14:6-13

How would people in John's day have read this passage? We shall see (Revelation 17 and 18) that "Babylon" is John's code word for Rome (he cannot safely be explicit). Babylon brings up biblical imagery for his readers, too. Centuries ago, the people of Israel were taken into captivity in Babylon. So "Babylon" brings up images of suffering, cruelty, and oppression in a strange land. All things John's readers' are experiencing.

In the midst of "Babylon" – suffering under Roman persecution – an angel comes with *"the eternal gospel"* – literally the *"the eternal good news."* What is the "good news"? We tend to boil it down to *"God loves you and you'll go to heaven when you die."* That's all true. But in Revelation the good news is a lot bigger than just you-and-Jesus-and-life-in-heaven.

- The good news is that God the creator is going to set all things right as the all-powerful judge (14:7).
- The good news is that evil will be once and for all cast down and destroyed (14:8).
- The good news is that God's justice will be true, thorough, and complete (14:9-11).⁵

In Isaiah 52 (perhaps one of the Old Testament passages John has in mind), Isaiah writes: *"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news, the good news of peace and salvation, the news that the God of Israel reigns. The watchmen shout and sing with joy, for before their very eyes they see the Lord returning to Jerusalem. Let the ruins of Jerusalem break into joyful song, for the Lord has comforted his people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has demonstrated his holy power before the eyes of all the nations. All the ends of the earth will see the victory of our God."*

Ultimately God did save His people from Babylon, just as Isaiah prophesied. And the good news is that God will save His people from whatever "Babylon" oppresses them – be it Rome or some modern evil power.

Where are we in this passage? On the one hand we are people who belong to this world – from every nation, tribe, language, and people (14:6) – on the other hand, we are those who have been redeemed from the earth (14:3), purchased from among the people on the earth as a special offering to God and to the Lamb (14:4), and are without blame (14:5). We are safe and secure in His care. Our God reigns. Give glory to him. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all the springs of water.

Ultimately who we are and what we do matters (14:12-13). At the end of a long discourse on salvation and resurrection through Jesus, Paul concludes: *"Thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, stand firm. Let nothing move you. **Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain**"* (1 Corinthians 15:56-58).

*Our walk with God is never a lonely walk,
it is a family occasion, if taken in the company of God's children.
If we lag behind, there are those who will turn
and offer words of encouragement,
hold out a hand and offer assistance over stiles and other obstacles,
share refreshment, help us from our knees when we stumble.*

*Our walk with God is never a lonely walk,
it is a joyful experience as along the path others join us,
attracted by the company of God's children,
singing the same songs of praise that angels sing,
following a path worn down by tears and joy and sacrifice.*

*Our walk with God is never a lonely walk,
for he walks with us, on a track that leads to a glorious destination.
Amen*

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⁵ We need to be careful about judging what – or who – is subject to the horrors of 14:9-11. God is the judge. This is His territory, not ours – thankfully. However it is clear that evil will not go unpunished. Living as we in an era when atrocities continue to happen, we know that ultimately God will ensure there is justice. That is good news.

Friday, August 2: Revelation 14:14-20

Back to good news. We have just read about a city – Babylon/Rome – the place of evil. It is a place of judgment. Its evil is punished. Now we're going outside the city, into the countryside – outside of Babylon/Rome – and what is happening? Jesus is harvesting.⁶ Literally, he is "bringing in the sheaves," gathering all His faithful ones – us.

The good news is that Jesus will save us.

There is a sobering message of judgement as well. Exactly what the winepress represents is a matter of debate. It likely alludes to Isaiah 63, where the Messiah is judging those who ruined God's earth and abused God's people. But it also likely alludes to the suffering of Jesus Himself – He took upon Himself God's wrath. His blood was shed so that we might have life. He paid the price for our sins. God's judgment fell on Him rather than us.⁷

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, *"As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of God's wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved"* (Ephesians 2:1-5).

Paul goes on to say, *"God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece"* (Ephesians 2:8-9). This is God's harvest. He is the One saving us. It's not something we earn by our good works. It's His gift of grace to us.

And Paul concludes, *"He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago"* (Ephesians 2:10). *"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain"* (1 Corinthians 15:58). *"As for you,"* Jesus says, *"follow me"* (John 21:22). Be encouraged. God has some wonderful things for you to do as you follow Him.

*How often when weary do we sigh
'The spirit is willing but the body is weak.'

How often when in prayer are thoughts
distracted by sounds or circumstance,
or prayers diverted by trivial concerns.
Baggage carried with us rather than left at your feet.

How often do we find ourselves apologising to you
for our abbreviated prayer life.
And yet you draw us still to be in your presence,
as you did the disciples at Gethsemene.
You want us to share in your life, to play our part.

You told your disciples to watch and pray,
so that they might not fall into temptation.
Do you ask the same of us and do we also fail you,
each time we whisper,
'The spirit is willing, but the body is weak'?

Grant us the strength, Lord, of body and of spirit,
to offer you the sacrifice of our lives. Amen*

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⁶ The phrase "one like the son of man" (see also 1:13) is another allusion to Daniel 7 – a metaphor for the coming Messiah, Jesus.

⁷ Where is this winepress of God's wrath? Outside the city – not part of the judgment on Babylon (14:9-11). Where was Jesus crucified? Outside the city. We deserve God's punishment, but instead Jesus takes God's wrath on Himself.

Saturday, August 3: Revelation 15

Think back to the Old Testament (again): when have we seen people singing songs of praise to God beside the sea? When have there been plagues upon those who are oppressing God's people and who are evil? For John's readers, Revelation 15 brings up immediate images of the Exodus from Egypt. During the Exodus, Pharaoh and the Egyptians experienced God's wrath through dreadful plagues. And after the Israelites passed through the Red Sea they sang about their miraculous deliverance from the powers of evil (Exodus 15).

The plagues in Egypt affected everyone except the Israelites – we are rather shocked at their almost indiscriminate nature. When the children of Israel celebrate in song beside sea they revel in the destruction of their enemies and the preservation of Israel alone. Although there are clear echoes of the Exodus, Revelation 15 is very different. The plagues in Revelation are very focused: they are only for those who worship the evil beasts. And the song the people sing focusses on the coming-to-faith of peoples from **all** nations: *"All nations will come and worship before you."* God does not want the nations of the world to be lured into evil by the nasty powers of this world – neither does He want them destroyed. God's great desire is that **all** people from **all** nations come to worship Him.

Remember Revelation 7? *"I 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.'"*

Christopher Wright comments, *"The fact is, we human beings NEED a lot of saving. And God DOES a lot of saving in the Bible. Human beings, living as mortal, weak and fallen creatures, have an almost limitless range of needs, in which, or out of which, we constantly call for some form of deliverance or another. We just keep on needing to be rescued it seems. This is not said in order to demean human worth or dignity. On the contrary, the reason God acts to save us in so many different ways is precisely because God believes we ARE WORTH saving, God created us in his own image. God loves and cares for us. God is moved to grief and anger by our sin, and moved to compassion by our weakness. And so, God saves us."*⁸

The good news is God does not want to save just one ethnic group. He doesn't want to save some people and not others. We don't have to fear we're not part of God's "in-group" or not. His desire is that **ALL** people come to faith in Him. *"I have come,"* Jesus says, *"that you may have life, and have it to the full"* (John 10:10). As we come to Him, we come in confidence that He who began a good work in us will carry it through to completion ...

*We can never match your perfection, Lord.
Try as we might we stumble and fall,
grasping for that which we feel is unobtainable.
We are nothing if not consistent in our falling from your grace.
For you are perfect love and we most certainly are not.
Perfect love casts out fear, and we are fearful,
Fearful of the unknown, fearful of failure.*

*"Son, I never ask for the impossible,
I never set a goal that cannot be reached,
a mountain that cannot be climbed,
even by those of a nervous disposition.
All I ask is that you come to me as you are
at this moment in time, and accept me as I AM.
There is no part of you that cannot be made clean,
renewed, restored.*

*Don't stumble, hold out your hand instead.
That's not too much to ask, is it?"*

Amen

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⁸ Christopher Wright, *Salvation belongs to our God*, p. 16.

Sunday, August 4: Revelation 16:1-9

"*Salvation belongs to our God.*" (Revelation 7:10). Let's keep that profound truth in mind as we continue through the next sections of Revelation. There is a lot of judgment ahead (keep in mind this is symbolic – not literal – language). It's good for us to remember that the fundamental identity of God is as **Saviour**. In the Old Testament – to which John is making constant allusions – the great defining event was the Exodus – God's **salvation** of His people from slavery and death. In the New Testament the great defining event is the death and resurrection of Jesus – **God's salvation** of all who believe from sin and death.

The God we meet in both the Old and New Testaments – most profoundly and personally in Jesus (whose name literally means "*Yahweh is salvation*") – is above all else the **God who saves**. This is what is so unique about God. This is the core of His heart and the foundation of His identity.

Our God loves and saves His creation. But if God did not hate the wickedness of the regimes that devastated much of Europe and Asia in the 20th Century, would He be a good and loving God? If God does not hate the atrocities of Boko Haram or ISIS, is God good? If God is not offended by the oppression of people sold into the sex-trade or working in sweatshops, is God loving? And if He ultimately does not finally do something about these evils, He would be neither loving nor good. God is our Saviour, but to save us He needs to deal with evil.

We should not be surprised – in fact we should be pleased – to see ultimate judgment on evil. Of course, we would love God to step in and intervene in a million different ways every day rather than one ultimate judgment. In truth, God may actually do more – on a moment-by-moment basis – than we notice or appreciate. But often God chooses to allow people to exercise their own free wills – for good or for bad. That is the nature of love: you grant freedom ... even though those whom you allow to act freely may choose to hurt themselves or others. We know that as parents: in love we allow our children freedom – sometimes we ache as they make hurtful choices to themselves or others. But to micromanage everyone our kids' decisions would not be loving. Painful though it is for us, they have to deal with the consequences of their actions.

We need a Saviour. Thankfully we have Jesus/the Lamb/the Lion/God-with-us. "*We still look for salvation from saviors that are anything or anyone but the living, saving God,*" says Christopher Wright. "*During the 2002 World Cup, posters were displayed in some shops in London with a photo of David Beckham (an English soccer player), arms stretched out wide, set against a background of the red cross of St. George, the flag of England. Underneath this image, with its obvious and rather blasphemous echoes of the crucifixion, went the caption, 'Beckham, our saviour.'* *Time* magazine, March 4, 2002, had as its cover a photo of the rock singer Bono, of U2, with headline, 'Can Bono save the world?' ... *All such human or idolized forms of salvation can never deliver what the promise – even when what they promise is good in itself. Salvation belongs to our God.*" (Wright, 54)

God is good. God is loving. One day, some day He will put all things right. In the meantime, celebrate that we know and serve a God who saves ... Our God saves. Jesus: Yahweh is salvation. Praise Him.

*If we had a fraction of the faith in you that you have in us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we showed a fraction of the love that you show to us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we possessed a fraction of the patience that you display with us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we shared just a portion of the blessings that we have received from you
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we showed as much trust in others as you have shown in us
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
If we claimed just a fraction of the power you promised to your Church
then this world would be transformed, Lord.
Transform us first, Lord, that we might transform this world
through your love and your power.
Amen*

Monday, August 5: Revelation 16:10-21

As we have seen throughout Revelation, John appears to be repeating a vision of God's love and judgment and salvation from different angles and perspectives. John comes back to these three great themes again and again. In Revelation 15 John reminds us of hope and salvation. In Revelation 16-18 he reminds us of God's ultimate judgment on "Babylon" – a code name for Rome – which in turn is symbolic of all human evil, corruption, oppression, abuse, tyranny, and violence.

Reading these passages can be depressing. To help us keep perspective let's keep the good news in mind. Back in Revelation 5, we have a wonderful vision of a Lamb who was slain upon the throne; Jesus, the crucified Saviour, is now the risen King. The once-and-for-all death of Jesus is the source of our salvation, and the reason we do not fear these horrendous images of judgment. While the cross may make us uncomfortable – it should! – it is also essential. The cross was where all the evil – of all people from all time, past, present and future – was laid on Jesus. It was ultimate evil. But the cross sets us free from our sin. The cross saves us from the penalty we deserve to pay. Christianity without the cross is Christianity without salvation.

- The cross of Jesus is redemptive. Through the death of Jesus, God has saved us. Thanks to Jesus' amazing love and death, we don't come to a nasty end – we are saved.
- The cross is for all people everywhere. You are welcome. I am welcome. All who put their hope in Him are saved.
- The cross is victorious. Through Jesus' death, God has ultimately destroyed the power of sin and death. One day, some day, that victory will be revealed for the wonder that it is. In the end, God wins. No question. No doubt.

Jesus' death on the cross was not an accident. It was the unavoidable cost of God's love and His mission to save us. He has dealt, one-and-for-all with the problem of human sin:

- Sin makes us guilty before God and deserving of punishment; on the cross Jesus took all that guilt and punishment on Himself. He has put us right with God. (1 Peter 2:24, 2 Corinthians 5:21)
- Sin is like slavery or bondage (some of us know how "trapped" we feel by our problems and how addictive sin can be). Jesus paid the price to buy our freedom. (Mark 10:45, Ephesians 1:7)
- Sin separates us from God. Jesus restores that relationship so we can communicate openly and freely with Him. We can pray and talk openly with Him. (Romans 5:10-11)
- Sin makes us "dirty." We feel yucky when we do things wrong. We are spiritually "unclean" as a result of sin. Jesus, as the perfect sacrificial lamb of God, cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7-2:2).

Jesus' death on the cross defeats the power of evil (Colossians 2:15), destroys the power of death (1 Corinthians 15), and renews our relationship not only with God but with each other and with God's creation.

All of this serves to remind us that these images of judgment in Revelation are NOT about us. We are saved. That's great news. This is a reminder, however, that we do need to keep actively engaged in our relationship with Jesus and in the world. It is easy to get seduced by the priorities, powers, and temptations of pop culture.

Good for you to take time – every day – to read God's Word and pray. As you do, pray God would guide you by His Spirit and help you stay focussed on Him, every moment, every day. And pray we can share God's love, too.

*Take this body, Lord, with all its imperfections and use it in your service.
May the aches and pains I feel be the start of conversations
about a God who makes us whole.
May the struggles that I face enable me to share with others
about a God who gives to all.
May the little I can offer say more
about your sacrifice and less about my role.
Take this body, Lord, with all its imperfections and use it in your service.
Amen*

Tuesday, August 6: Revelation 17:1-8

Alistair Metcalfe writes, "*Judgement begins on Babylon, figurative of a society or worldview glittering with riches and beauty but whose morality is corrupt and godless. Babylon has got into bed with the beast. As he writes, John sees the unchallengeable power of the city of Rome over a vast empire, stamping its authority on anyone whose philosophy stood against its own – including the early Christians (v 6). Revelation's original readers were facing this power as a daily threat to their very lives. But John's condemnation is not of cities in general or of Rome in particular but of the human tendency to worship created things rather than the Creator.*"

"There is nothing inherently more wicked about a city than any other place on earth, just more people doing wicked things in less space. Yes, cities can produce 'evil things' (v 5), but in general the world we inhabit is full of riches and beautiful things, from Niagara Falls to nanotechnology. Corruption comes when people go beyond the 'wow' and are seduced into worship."

What's the problem? "*Any society,*" theologian Richard Bauckham writes, "*which absolutizes its own economic prosperity at the expense of others comes under Babylon's condemnation.*" John sees Rome as a seductive prostitute. The Roman way of doing things promises peace and prosperity, but John sees the golden cup from which she drinks as 'full of abominations' (17:4). Why? Because Rome's wealth and "good life" resulted from a rejection of God, a hedonistic pursuit of wealth and pleasure, economic exploitation, a casual attitude to human life, and the exercise of power to benefit powerful elites. The rich got richer, and the poor got poorer. Sexual morality had disappeared. Violence had become entertainment. Sound familiar? This is a sobering wake up call for us in nations like Canada ... where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, morality is disappearing, and violence dominates the media. What might God say to us?

What do we do? How do we live in this culture? We are challenged to live differently. To model an alternative lifestyle. To create a counter culture. To live as Jesus might live if He were living in our city. Throughout the New Testament we are challenged to model different values. We are called to demonstrate a different way – a better way – of living characterized by virtues of loving God, loving our neighbour as ourselves, justice, peace-making, mercy, and grace. "*The fruit of the Spirit,*" says Paul, "*is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). How can I live out those virtues in my daily life, today?

*Lord God, help us to love those whom we find it difficult to love.
Give us a heart that reaches out to those we would otherwise ignore.
Give us the strength not to cross on the other side of the road,
but to play the part of the Samaritan.
This will not be easy, Lord.
It is not in our nature.
We spread our love thinly among those we can relate to,
those who share our values,
and those who do not threaten our comfortable lifestyle.
It's not easy, Lord, and on our own we shall fail.
But with your help all things are possible.
You led the way, and it is your example that we look to.
You turned the values of this world upside down.
Do the same with us, Lord.
Help us live the reality of your Love.
Amen*

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Wednesday, August 7: Revelation 17:9-18

Two cities feature in the final chapters of Revelation – Babylon and Jerusalem, both metaphors for the biblical story. In the Old Testament, Babylon is the great city of violence and conquest, the city of exile for Israel, far from their home in shattered Jerusalem. But for John, writing over 600 years after the exile, Babylon, the mother of prostitutes, drunk with the blood of God's people, was Rome: Rome which had become a place of

Christian persecution under Nero and Domitian.⁹ God's people were strangers in a hostile land once again. Jerusalem once more lay in ruins, the temple destroyed by the Romans in AD 70.

Cities illustrate the best and most creative gifts of humans made in God's image: great architecture, glorious art, sustainable communities, beautiful parks, multi-layered community, fine health facilities, good schools and universities, wonderful caring networks ... Cities also exhibit the worst and deepest evils of our fallen nature: crime, slums, homelessness, poverty, prostitution, alienation, pollution ... Cities are also where most of us are called to witness and work for the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.

Yes, He will judge Babylon/Rome: ultimately the vision at the end of Revelation 17 is of civil war and implosion as the forces of evil turn in on themselves and self-destruct ... exactly what happened in the Roman Empire.

Some people long for a romantic – rural – golden age. And some Christians have purposely left the city – at least more central areas – for the suburbs or the countryside because it seems easier to be a Christian there. However Revelation reminds us that God loves cities, too. He is coming with a new Jerusalem – a new city (Revelation 21-22). God is just as present in a city as in the country. We are God's temples in whom His Spirit dwells: wherever we are, God's is there. And wherever we are, we are called to live as God's people. Wherever we live we will face temptations, difficulties, and obstacles: *"They will wage war against the Lamb ..."* Wherever we live, we also live with confident hope: *"But the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers"* (17:14).

"You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free," says Paul. *"But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' ... Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh ... The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like (sounds like Babylon/Rome.). I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:13-25).
Wherever we are, may God help us live our faith.

*This world I live in, this town I live in,
this street I live in, this house I live in,
may each be the focus of my prayer.*

*Those I live with, those I rub shoulders with,
those I work with, those I don't get on with,
may each be the focus of my prayer.*

*Those who laugh, those who cry,
those who hurt, those who hide,
may each be the focus of my prayer.*

*Prayers centred less on self and more on others,
less on my circumstances, more on the needs of others.
May my life be likewise centred less on self and more on You,
and through You to the world, in which I live and move.
Amen*

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⁹ As we have noted, John could not directly name Rome – unless he wanted to die and to have this letter destroyed. John gives us clues to how to interpret his symbolism: the seven heads are seven hills – Rome is built on seven hills. The various kings or rulers likely refer to Roman emperors (the numbers 7, 10 etc. all come from Daniel). *"The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction"* (17:11) likely refers to Nero – one of the worst persecutors of Christians. There was a popular Roman myth that although Nero died, he would return again to restore a golden age to Rome – an evil, twisted Messiah-like-anti-Christ-like story. To the Romans themselves (not the Christians.) Nero represented the pinnacle of Roman glory.

Thursday, August 8: Revelation 18:1-8

John and his readers are living under the iron heels of imperial Rome at its zenith. In John's time the Coliseum would have just been completed. The Roman Forum, temples, palaces, and other buildings were awe-inspiring masterpieces of art and architecture. Wealth flowed into the city. Rich Romans feasted, partied, and lived the high life. Rome was known as "the eternal city" because it seemed indestructible. No one dared question its authority. Rome believed it had the divine right to rule the entire known world.

But beneath the glamour and glitter, for a very select few, was a massive dark side for the vast majority. The Roman Empire was built on the destroyed lives and broken bodies of slaves pulled in from their vast empire. Crippling taxes devastated local economies. Anyone who promoted local freedom or local culture was brutally eradicated. Most people – if they weren't slaves – lived in crippling poverty. You didn't have to scratch very far beneath the surface to see the deep-rooted evils that underlay Rome. The dreadful events of 18:6-8 emphasize that what happens to Babylon/Rome is simply what it brings upon itself ...

John's readers would have been astonished at his vision that such a global superpower could ever fail. Rome, in their time, ruled almost the entire known world – with an iron scepter and sword.

On the one hand, John is looking forward to the fall – specifically – of the Roman Empire. On the other hand, this prophecy is more than that. John is anticipating God's judgment on any nation that creates its wealth at the expense of others, fawns over the superwealthy while ignoring the poor, gets googly-eyed over glittering celebrities, ignores justice for the oppressed, believes economic prosperity and military might are the be all and end all, and doesn't care about the consequences for people or God's creation. Sound familiar?

"Come out of her, my people," says God (18:4). Some people have taken this literally and tried to isolate themselves from anything non-Christian. The problem with this is that our mission, from Abraham on (Genesis 12) is to be God's ambassadors – His salt and light – His counter cultural community **in this world**. Jesus' final commission to us is, "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). We can't do this in self-imposed exile. And the reality is that in our connected world, we can never get away from our culture anyway. We have to find ways redemptively to engage our culture, not escape it.

Is it possible to live as God's people in Babylon/Rome/Lethbridge? How can we be in the world, but not of it? It will not always be easy. But this is Jesus' promise to us: "Be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). John, writing to these same struggling churches – and to us – says: "You belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those (evil) people, because the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world" (1 John 4:4). We go into today confident of that truth. May we have our eyes open and our hearts open to share His hope and love.

*Within the circle of my family and friends,
May I be a source of peace, a hand to hold:
Accessible, generous, loving,
A blessing.*

*Within the circle of my acquaintances
May I be a steady rock, a ready shoulder:
Dependable, trustworthy, caring,
A blessing*

*Within the circle of my community
May I be a light that shines, a love that flows:
Discernible, accessible, healing
A blessing.
Amen*

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Friday, August 9: Revelation 18:9-24

There are beautiful things in our world – wonderful things which God has made. In Revelation 21:18-21 we see the other city – the new Jerusalem: *"The wall was made of jasper, and the city was pure gold, as clear as glass. The wall of the city was built on foundation stones inlaid with twelve precious stones: the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst . The twelve gates were made of pearls – each gate from a single pearl. And the main street was pure gold, as clear as glass."* These precious commodities can glorify God when used rightly. Like a gorgeous sunrise, exquisite rose, moving sonata, or profound painting, such beautiful creations can inspire us in our worship.

In Revelation 18:11-13, we have a similar list of commodities, pillaged by Rome for her own perverted pleasure ... and gathered by wealthy nations, like Canada, today. These are (almost) all good things. But notice the very last thing (18:13): *the bodies and souls of men*. The city of Rome – and the luxurious quality of life the Roman elite enjoyed – was built on the broken hopes, lives – and bodies – of other people. They enslaved millions of people, treating human beings as livestock to be used, abused, and thrown away. They ravaged other countries, plundering their wealth and natural resources without paying anything close to market value. Of course our economic system doesn't do anything at all like that anymore ... does it?

"In your streets flowed the blood of the prophets and of God's holy people and the blood of people slaughtered all over the world"(18:24). It's a sombre – devastating – indictment of Babylon/Rome.

As we have noted earlier, we can look at these visions with fear and horror. It's not a pretty picture. It's not intended to be. Sin – violence, oppression, injustice, taking advantage of other people, self-indulgence, financial-obsession, sweatshops, the sex-trade, racism – is not a pretty thing. And judgment upon an entire social-economic-political system built upon those values cannot possibly be pretty either.

Alternatively we can look at these prophecies as oracles of hope. One day, some day, the strongholds of injustice, suffering, violence, poverty, racism, genocide, discrimination and fear will be destroyed. Evil within our world will be eradicated. Those who love God and love their neighbour will be vindicated. One of the Old Testament themes John is constantly evoking is the Exodus from Egypt (note the continuing emphasis on plagues in Revelation 18). What was the Exodus all about? Freedom. From slavery. From economic oppression. From racism. From injustice. From exploitation. From violence. From death.

Jonathan Sacks encourages us to think about this actively and practically in our own lives: *"One of the most important distinctions I have learned in the course of reflection on Jewish history is the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism is the belief that things will get better. Hope is the faith that, together, we can make things better. Optimism is a passive virtue; hope, an active one. It takes no courage to be an optimist, but it takes a great deal of courage to have hope."* Lord, give us great courage ... and hope.

*The true adventurer is willing to walk
through sunshine or rain,
when the going is good,
or ground slips away from beneath their feet.*

*The true adventurer delights in the glory
of each mountain peak,
yet does not fear the danger of forest
or swift flowing stream.*

*The true adventurer listens to the words
of one who knows the way intimately,
having already walked the path they travel on.
This day, I choose to walk with You, O Lord.
Amen*

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Saturday, August 10: Revelation 19:1-10

Weddings are wonderful events. The "best" weddings I have been to have not had the fanciest gowns or tuxedos, the most elaborate decorations, or the most over-the-top receptions. The best weddings I have been to may have cost comparatively little. What made them so special was that they were really God-centered worship services, celebrating God had brought these two people together, God was creating something new and wonderful in and through their marriage, and praying God's blessing on the couple as they go forward.

In the Old Testament, the people of God are often portrayed as God's bride – freed in the Exodus, wooed in the wilderness, married by solemn covenant at Sinai, unfaithful for many generations, and won all over again in a future covenant renewal – a new covenant – that would restore all of creation (see Hosea and Isaiah 54-55). The biblical book, Song of Songs – at one level a wonderful celebration of God's gift of human love – has also been interpreted by both Jewish and Christian commentators as a description of God's love for His people. John is evoking these Old Testament images as he describes the amazing wedding between the bride – us – and Jesus. There will be a great wedding feast (see Isaiah 25:6-9 – Jesus also used the picture of a wedding feast of the king's son to describe the Kingdom of God in Matthew 22 and 25).

People had been unfaithful. But there is hope. There is a future for those with faith in Jesus. And what a future it is. We're back in the throne room and there's a wedding and feast about to begin.

Now we understand why John has pictured human evil as the gaudy, amoral, promiscuous, abusive whore named Babylon. Our real destiny – our true purpose – is to be holy and undefiled in a godly, righteous, pure relationship with Jesus. John has been intentionally creating a contrast between the sham of being in a supposedly fulfilling "relationship" with a promiscuous prostitute versus being in a wonderful, deep, safe, loving marriage with a faithful, loving partner.

He is comparing a supposedly fulfilling life cluttered with the materialism, self-centeredness, and vanity of popular culture (Babylon) with the truly satisfying life that comes from the genuine love, security, and joy of being in an authentic relationship with Jesus. There is really no comparison between the hideous images of the whore of Babylon and this amazing vision of the bridegroom, Jesus. There is not a shred of similarity between the horrible experience of life in Babylon and the wedding feast of the Lamb in the Temple. That's John's point. If we think life without Jesus is really all that wonderful, we're sadly deluded. Life with Him now – and certainly life with Him hereafter – is so much more incredible.

Note: we do not deserve the shining, pure linen the bride is wearing. We deserve to be judged with Babylon. But thanks to the shed blood of Jesus, we are forgiven and made pure by His grace and mercy. By His grace we are saved (the prophet Hosea uses a similar metaphor for God's salvation in Hosea 1).

Compare Isaiah 25:6-9 with what we have just read in Revelation 19: *"In Jerusalem, the Lord of Heaven's Armies will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world. It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat. There he will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the earth. He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears. He will remove forever all insults and mockery against his land and people. The Lord has spoken. In that day the people will proclaim, 'This is our God. We trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the Lord, in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings.'"*

Everyone is invited to the wedding feast. Everyone is welcome to the celebration. Come ...

*Today, and all days, embrace us in a love that knows no end.
Today, and all days, fill us with a power that overcomes.
Today, and all days, encourage us with a word that nourishes.
Today, and all days, inspire us with a hope that sustains.
Today, and all days, comfort us with a peace that endures.
Today, and all days, bring wholeness of body, mind and spirit.
Today, and all days. Amen*

Sunday, August 11: Revelation 19:11-21

This is a different picture of Jesus than we're used. John is repeating a vision of God's love, salvation and judgment from different angles and perspectives. John comes back to these great themes again and again. The imagery seems odd – even disturbing – to us, but we need to think of it as John's readers might have:

- White horses were the best ... the idea of a "King of kings" riding a white horse would bring up images of a foreign/Parthian invasion – the great fear of the Romans. How much more should Rome fear the coming of the true King of kings, God Himself, with His righteousness.
- Jesus' fiery eyes symbolize his divinity, and His righteous anger (see 1:14).
- His many crowns show He is true ruler of all nations – even Rome is under His authority.
- His cloak, dipped in blood, draws on Isaiah 63.
- The sharp sword image comes from the Jewish book, the Wisdom of Solomon (for Christians, it also alludes to Hebrews 4:12: *"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart"*).
- His title, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, emphasizes His supreme authority over all other rulers, including the emperor of Rome.

For people suffering under Roman tyranny, the hope of salvation and true freedom would have been incredibly encouraging. The military imagery in the passage seems a bit uncharacteristic, but we need to remember it is symbolic imagery. The victory Jesus won – the ultimate conquest over evil and sin – was not won at literal sword point (indeed, when Peter tried to use his sword he was severely rebuked) – the victory was won by Jesus' love, His obedience, His sacrificial death, and His blood shed for us. The paradox of this passage is that Jesus wears no armour – only fine, clean, white linen – and His only weapon is His Word – His love. By His holiness, His love, and his Word He disarms – He destroys – the armored legions of evil.

Revelation 19 draws on the Messianic imagery of Isaiah 11:1-10: *"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord – and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist."*

"The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious."

Of course we await the complete fulfillment of this amazing vision. But the process has already begun. And we look forward with eager anticipation to its completion.

*I will not stumble, for your hand will guide,
and in your footsteps I will tread.
I will not grow weary, for your spirit sustains, and my soul shall be renewed.
I will not be weak, for your truth strengthens,
and no evil shall defeat me.
From the depths of the earth,
I shall soar upward on wings like eagles,
spread the news throughout the world,
run the race against all odds,
and shall prevail. Amen*

Monday, August 12: Revelation 20:1-6, 1 John 3:7-24

The central things John has made crystal clear – again and again – in Revelation are that:

- God has won a complete and comprehensive victory through the death and resurrection of Jesus;
- Evil, while still in existence, has been defeated and will be wiped away one day some day;
- In the meantime, God's people struggle, but will persevere through God's power;
- Our future destiny is to reign with God forever. We are saved by His grace and love.

The big themes – of God's supreme authority, God's victory, God's love, God's salvation, and God's ultimate triumph – are what are really important in Revelation 20, as they are throughout the book.

Revelation 20 does introduce the concept of a "millennium" – a special 1000 year period. This is the only place in all Scripture such a time period is mentioned. We might need to be cautious taking the details of this too literally. To do so may actually be to limit God: we think He can only do things the way we – with our very finite minds – have figured out He has to do things.

We interpret most numbers in Revelation symbolically – 7 churches, 7 horns, 7 eyes, 7 trumpets, 7 seals, 12,000 from 12 tribes, 666 ... Now, as we come to the number 1000, how do we understand this number? Literally? Why or why not? Like "7," throughout Scripture "1000" implies completeness and perfection. The psalmist writes *"the cattle on a thousand hills"* belong to God (Psalm 50:10) – this doesn't mean that the cattle on the 1001st hill belong to someone else; it means all cattle belong to God. God is faithful to a thousand generations (Deuteronomy 7:9) – this doesn't mean His faithfulness stops with the 1001st generation; it speaks of the completeness of His faithfulness. In Psalm 90, the author writes, *"for you a thousand years are as a passing day, as brief as a few night hours"* clearly using the number 1000 figuratively.

And so probably (who knows for sure?) – the binding of the devil for a thousand years is not a literal time period but represents the completeness of his binding until the short time he is set free (even then he is not completely free). And the thousand year reign of the faithful is may not be a literal 1000 years, but symbolic of the eternal completeness of our resurrection with Jesus.¹⁰

The point of Revelation is not to take us on a wild goose chase of obscure clues to speculate about the future. It's not that kind of literature – it's a series of visions and dreams (like Daniel and Ezekiel). To try to read it as a schematic drawing of end times is to miss the whole point. Its purpose is to encourage us, to help us persevere in tough times, and to remind us of God's glory, authority, power, and victory through Jesus. The point of all of Scripture – including Revelation – is to help us know the depths of God's amazing love for us, the salvation He offers us through Jesus, and the new lives we can live – now and hereafter – in Jesus. Attempts to read Revelation as an architectural drawing of the end times are products of the 19th-20th century industrial age ... not the way Christians have read Revelation through the ages.

I have encouraged you to read 1 John 3:7-24, today, to keep Revelation 20 in perspective.

John, in his letter, reminds us that *"the Son of God came to destroy the works of the devil"* (which we see ultimately in Revelation 20). But there are very practical implications of this: *"We should love one another. If we love our brothers and sisters who are believers, it proves that we have passed from death to life. Let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion – how can God's love be in that person? Don't be surprised, dear brothers and sisters, if the world hates you."*

In conclusion, John writes, *"This is his commandment: We must believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as he commanded us. Those who obey God's commandments remain in fellowship with him, and he with them. And we know he lives in us because the Spirit he gave us lives in us."* Good news!

¹⁰ We need to be careful not to build an entire theology out of one – highly symbolic passage – in one – highly symbolic – book (note again, this is symbolism straight out of Daniel 7). You may also note that there is no mention of anything at all like the popular caricature of a "rapture" of God's people in Revelation (you would think it would be here.) – this theological speculation comes from a particular interpretation of one passage in 1 Thessalonians 4; nothing even close to this is recorded in Revelation. Hmmm.

*We want for nothing if we journey with our God,
his footsteps leading, his hand to steady if we should fall.
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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Tuesday, August 13: Revelation 20:7-15

I was cleaning a mop in the sink at McDonald's. All of a sudden I heard a horrendous crash. And the room went dark. My heart raced. My adrenaline pumped. The handle of the mop had hit a neon light tube behind me, which then fell to the tile floor and exploded. This was it: I knew I was fired. But then I heard a deep laugh. The manager was standing there looking at my terrified face – and laughed. He had a broom in one hand, a dust pan in the other, and began sweeping up the mess. *"Take an extra coffee break,"* he said, *"it looks like you need it."* I wasn't fired. In fact my hourly rate went \$2.65 to \$2.85 that week ...

This temporary release of Satan – whenever and whatever that means – seems a bit like a return to the dark times earlier in Revelation. The language about Gog and Magog appears mysterious and evil, but it's actually right out of Ezekiel 38-39 (if we knew our Old Testament) – these are metaphors for nations that want to attack God's people but God promises His complete protection (read Ezekiel 38-39 for the background). Note that Satan gathers all his forces together, but there is no battle. The army of evil is destroyed by fire from heaven (another Old Testament reference – this is how Elijah destroyed the prophets of Baal).

Just as my neon tube accident amounted to nothing, Satan's flustering and blustering amounts to nothing. God looks at the gathering of evil, laughs, gets out the broom and dustpan and throws it all away ... not into the garbage can but into the fiery lake of burning sulfur where Satan joins his awful partners in crime. Death and the grave are thrown into this cesspool of suffering, too. Light is swiftly restored.

What about us? We are saved by the blood of Jesus. Although Revelation 20 has been interpreted as *"you are saved by your good deeds,"* that would be contrary to everything else in Scripture. What is happening is that Jesus' great work of salvation – His righteousness – is attributed to us. We get the credit for what Jesus has done. Far from being rewarded for our own good deeds, we are blessed by the incredible gift of salvation through Jesus. As Paul puts it: *"For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ."*

"Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous ... Just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:16-21).

"God is love," John writes, *"and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the Day of Judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world. Such love has no fear, because perfect love expels all fear"* (1 John 4:16-18). This is the good news in which we live.

As we live in this in between time – sometime between Jesus first coming and His return – our challenge and invitation is to live in such a way that the world sees Jesus in us. How can I live His love? How can I live His grace? Lord, may we shine as lights, be ambassadors of hope, and be good news to our world ...

*When we walk with you, in the light of your love,
it is your glory seen, not ours.
When we talk of you to those whom we meet,
It is your words that speak, not ours.
When we minister to people in need,
it is your hands that heal, not ours.
When we worship you and offer our lives,
your name is glorified, always.
Amen*

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Wednesday, August 14: Revelation 21:1-7

Things are all new. Nothing is ever going to be same again. It's going to be wonderful (if a bit overwhelming). I remember thinking that when I got married. I remember thinking that when each of our kids was born. I remember thinking that when I got through all the nasty tests to diagnose my facial pain and found out that while it is chronic, it is not terminal. I remember thinking that when we have moved and started over in a new community. But these are just foretastes of this amazing new beginning to come ...

Revelation 21 introduces us to fantastic – life-changing – universe-rattling – breathtaking images. John sees in a new heaven and a new earth:

- *"The holy city, the new Jerusalem, (is) coming down from God out of heaven like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband"* – a wedding is about to happen.
- *"All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children"* – a new birth, a new family.
- *"He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever"* – complete healing.
- *"God's home is now among his people. He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them"* – a whole new beginning. A whole new community. God is with us, personally, forever. We now live in His hometown – or He lives in our hometown – we cannot comprehend it.

Notice, we are not all flying off to some cloud-paved heaven as in much popular imagery. Instead, God is making heaven and earth anew ... the two in some way become one as God now dwells among His people. The old distinction between heaven and earth blurs into some incomprehensible new reality.

The image is very different from the cloud-like harp-playing heaven we sometimes imagine. In John's vision, the old earth is still recognizable in the new, although the new is without the death, tears, evil, and everything rotten in the present. It is the old made new. In fact, it's like this present world is only a dream and we wake up to reality – more vivid, more beautiful, more intense than the dream we have been experiencing. It's like we have been living our whole lives in darkness: suddenly the sun rises and we see the world as never before.

C.S. Lewis describes it this way: *"You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among the mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking glass (mirror). And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass (mirror). And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in one sense just the same as the real one: yet at the same time they were somehow different – deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old (earth) and the new (earth) was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more."*

God doesn't reject us – our bodies, our minds, or our world. He doesn't zap us off to some strange new reality. He makes everything new. Deeper. More beautiful. More real. More intense. Perfect. As they were always intended to be. It is like we come home to the place we were always intended to be and discover life – real life – as God planned it to be. Life is more real and wonderful than we can imagine ...

*The Lord is our salvation, the rock upon which we stand,
the light by which we walk, the strength by which we overcome.
Therefore we shall live by faith and fear no one,
for the Lord our God is with us,
walking beside and before us, sheltering us from harm.
It is the Lord's song that we sing,
his praise within our hearts, his word upon our lips
and the reason that we live.
Amen*

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Thursday, August 15: Revelation 21:6-21

Revelation is a tale of two cities. One is Babylon/Rome (London/New York/Paris/Toronto/(Lethbridge?)), one of the wonders of the world adorned with what its residents believed were the most beautiful buildings, most amazing people, most luxurious clothes, most spectacular boulevards, and most awe-inspiring temples. We think our edifices and accomplishments are SO amazing ... but you don't have to look too hard to see the suffering, poverty, injustice, racism, pollution, abuse, cruelty, sexism, disease, exploitation ...

The other city in Revelation is the new Jerusalem: shining with the glory of God, its brilliance like that of a very precious jewel, clear as crystal. The wall is made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls are decorated with every kind of precious stone: jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, turquoise, jacinth, and amethyst. The twelve gates are twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city is of gold, as pure as transparent glass. It's a city and a garden – a restored garden going back to Genesis 1 and 2 with a tree of life. And when you look deeper, there is no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, or tears, or injustice, or fear, or disease ... Would you rather live in old Babylon or the new Jerusalem?

Human beings can only create shadows – dim reflections – of the wonders of God. Our art, culture, architecture, and technology are great, but nothing compared to what God has done, is doing, and will do. When we worship our own creations as the be-all and end-all, we are sorely disappointed. They will crumble away to nothing (or be thrown into a lake of fire – yikes). Revelation tells us that the old, human-built world, is a gaudy prostitute, a disheveled, destitute parody of real beauty, real love, and real relationship. In contrast, the wonders of God's new heaven and earth are described as a gorgeous, pure, holy bride. And the love and relationship of real life in God's presence is unimaginably wonderful.

Lest we get too literal, however, remember this is a vision and we are thinking symbolically – the new Jerusalem is a cube – just about 2000 kms per side (we may possibly imagine a city 2000 x 2000 km side to side, but this city is 2000 km high, too) and the wall is 65 metres thick.¹¹ A cube-shaped city? This is another time when our Old Testament ignorance limits our understanding: the holy of holies in the heart of the Temple was cube-shaped. Jews believed God's presence literally dwelt among His people in that cube shaped space in the heart of the Temple – no human could enter it. This new Jerusalem is shaped like a gigantic holy of holies.

This city *is* God's genuine presence among us. He is here. But we *can* enter. We are with Him. Will we actually see a gigantic cube-shaped city? None of us (humans) really knows. What we do know is we shall enjoy God's perfect presence. And it will be breathtakingly, overwhelmingly, astoundingly, gloriously, beyond-descriptively beautiful. That is the point John is trying to convey to us.

This is the future we anticipate in confident hope. In the meantime, our calling is to pray – and to work – towards the reality that "*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" We are not instructed to give up on this world. We are called to be Jesus' ambassadors, in small and big ways to reflect God's love into this broken, bruised, and hurting world. We are establishing a beachhead, a colony of heaven, a counter-cultural community, a microcosm of the new Jerusalem as we live God's love and grace day by day.

¹¹ Interestingly, 2000 km x 2000 km was just about the dimensions of the Roman Empire during John's time. Perhaps this number is a dramatic statement about whose Kingdom really matters? For further reading: this imagery is straight out of Ezekiel 40-47.

*When our hearts are weary,
troubled or weighed down,
we cry to you in prayer knowing that you hear us,
and hearing, will answer in your time,
bringing healing, wholeness, and peace.
You raise us up from the place that we have fallen
and put our feet on firmer ground,
that we might walk in confidence with you.
Such love, such patience.
To you alone we bring our thanks.
Amen*

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Friday, August 16: Revelation 21:22-22:7

We may have an idea that all "matter" (the earth and physical universe) are evil; we want to escape it to some super-spiritual, non-physical existence. Heaven is the opposite of earth. Earth is dirty and evil; heaven will be clean and pure. We can thank Plato for that notion. But Plato wasn't Christian. And the common Christian perspective of heaven as some unearthly place – as far from and as different from earth as possible – is NOT biblical. In fact the Christian hope is very much about a new physical-yet-also-spiritual heaven and earth, about new – physical-yet-also-spiritual bodies (1 Corinthians 15), about a new – physical-yet-also-spiritual – relationship with God, with Jesus, and with the Spirit and with one another. Heaven comes to earth. In some inconceivable way, the two become one ...

Of course there is layer upon layer of symbolism in Revelation 21-22 (especially from Ezekiel 40-47 – skim it sometime). Because the entire city is the holy of holies (God's actual, real presence), there is no Temple in the city – He is everywhere. Night and darkness – symbols of evil, confusion, danger and chaos – are no more because the Light of the World is here: there is no need any longer for the sun or moon. The gates of the city are never closed – we come freely into God's presence. A wonderful river, representing life in God's Spirit, flows through the city (John 7, Ezekiel 47).¹² Somehow this new earth is both a city and a garden (linking us back to Genesis 1-2). Though God's Spirit, both city and country are redeemed and united in His new creation. The leaves of the tree of life (Genesis 2) provide healing to all nations. Will it actually physically look like this? Who knows? The vision's purpose is to leave us speechless, awestruck by the beauty and wonder of God's new creation ... and overwhelmed and dumfounded by the new – personal – relationship we will have with the Father, Son, and Spirit.

For people in John's day – suffering intense persecution, oppression, racism, sexism, cruelty and injustice under the jackboot of imperial Rome – these visions offer amazing hope. For people today – enduring refugee camps, living in fear of Boko Haram, struggling in poverty, trapped in human trafficking, sleeping rough in the coulee, devastated by a diagnosis of cancer, battling the demons of mental health – these visions offer hope.

"In this world you will have trouble," Jesus said. *"But take heart. I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). In the same way Jesus has overcome the evils of this world, we can overcome, too, through His Spirit. As we have seen throughout Revelation, we may go through some VERY difficult seasons of life. We may have some brutal struggles against the forces of evil, suffering and pain. But in the end, we know this is only temporary.

As we read in Philippians 3:13-14, Paul likens life to running a marathon: *"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* The race is long. It can be hard. But we know that the goal is worth it.

Revelation 21-22 assure us all who come to Him, in faith, will (one day, some day) experience the light, life, healing, and fulfillment that come only through a perfect relationship with the King, Lamb, and Spirit. Therefore, *"Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for the true faith. Hold tightly to the eternal life to which God has called you ..."* (1 Timothy 6:11-12).

¹² There is no river in the present earthly city of Jerusalem. This vision is not some reworking of the present city of that name, but a symbolic vision of a whole new reality – the miraculous coming together of heaven and earth and the presence of God among us.

*We are not grains of sand upon the shore, buffeted by sea and storm,
but individuals loved by God more intimately than we could ever know.
Though from a distance we seem insignificant and frail,
the creating breath that formed us,
now lives in and sustains us.
Thank you, Saving God,
made known to us in Jesus Christ
not only by his words, but through his sacrificial life.
May our lives reflect not only his love, but your glory,
and the whole earth sing your praises.
Amen*

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Saturday, August 17: Revelation 22:8-21

C.S. Lewis concludes his *Chronicles of Narnia* (fantastic Christian allegories – please read all 7 books some time) with this dialogue. Aslan – a lion – the Christ figure – says to His friends, *"You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be."*

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan ..."

"No fear of that," said Aslan, "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.

"There WAS a real railway accident," said Aslan softly, "Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands (this life we all live in this reality) – dead. The (school) term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."

And as He spoke He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before ..."

God wants us to know that real life has not begun yet; we are still waiting for Chapter One to begin. Now we live in the shadows; we look forward to seeing the universe, one another – and the Lord – as we really are, in all our glory. Now we see struggle through life; we look forward to truly living happily ever after.

"The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let the one who hears say, "Come." Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life." That invitation is for us. But we are also the inviters – wouldn't it be great to share this good news (Advent is a great time to do this). Something so great and beautiful that we could not possibly begin to write them is about to begin. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

*We are born in hope, raised in hope, nurtured in hope, loved in hope,
comforted in hope, suffer in hope, endure in hope, overcome in hope.
Hope in the One who has endured all things
that we might know freedom.
Hope in the One who has given us his Spirit
that we might have power.
Hope in the One who has loved us beyond death
that we might have life.
Hope in the One who prepares a place for us
that we might share eternity with him.
For hope that endures, we thank you Lord. Amen*

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Sunday, August 18: 1 John 5

We began Revelation, way back in early July, reading from 1 John to remind us of God's great good news to us through Jesus. As we transition from Revelation to Advent – the season during which we anticipate and celebrate the birth of Jesus – the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star – it's good to come back to that fundamental good news. Read through 1 John 5 a few times.

- What are we reading about who God is?
- Who we are?
- His love for us?
- Our mission in His world?

What is God saying to you?

*Glorious Trinity, make your presence known in this place,
through our worship, our prayer,
the reading of your Word,
Father, Son, Holy Spirit,
within whose unity lies all that is you,
perfect love, justice, peace, and power.
As we gather here today, your body,
your church throughout this world,
fill our outstretched hearts with your spirit,
encircle us with your love, make yourself known to us
in new way, exciting ways, challenging ways.
Empower us, inspire us, glorious Trinity.
Amen*

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Monday, August 19: Acts 17:1-15

For the next few days we'll be looking at Paul's letters to the Christians in Thessalonica. Thessalonica then (and now) is the second largest city in Greece (now over 1 million people). It is the leading city in Macedonia. This passage introduces us to Thessalonica in the first century – not a friendly place for followers of Jesus. Paul, Silas, and their host, Jason, are treated very badly.

Paul and Silas flee at night to Berea (modern day Veria), 75 kilometers west. Their critics in Thessalonica are so incensed by their teaching, they also travel the 75 kms to Berea, just to continue to make their lives miserable. In the ancient world – when people had to walk such distances – to make a 75 km journey suggests these critics really harbour a lot of venom.¹³

In Thessalonica, however, some people did come to faith in Jesus: *"Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks (including Jason) and not a few prominent women."* These folks became the nucleus of the church in Thessalonica. But it must have been a tough place to be Jesus' church. The same people who made Jason's, Silas' and Paul's lives unpleasant would have continued to oppose the new believers and the church.

Few of us can even begin to imagine facing opposition like this, just because of our faith. But this is the reality today in much of the world. Pray for Christians in Middle Eastern countries, south Asia (including India, Burma, Indonesia and other countries), China, and North Africa. Pray that God would protect them, encourage them, and bless their witness ... even in hostile, life-threatening situations. Thank God for the freedom of religion we enjoy in Canada. May we use our freedom wisely (remember Proverbs 3), to live and share our faith through our lives and words.

¹³ Luke's note that *"the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"* (Acts 17:11) is a wonderful comment on the Bereans – but a sad indictment of the folks in Thessalonica. May we receive God's word with eagerness ... and diligently examine it against the Scriptures.

*God the Father, Creator and sustainer,
Delighting in the lives of all
who live in grateful obedience to your will,
we bring to you the thanks offering of our hearts.
God the Son, Saviour and redeemer,
Welcoming all who in humility come to you willingly as servants and disciples,
we bring to you the thanks offering of our hands.
God the Spirit, Power and supporter,
Living water flowing into all who are open to the possibility of new birth,
we bring to you the thanks offering of our lives.
Amen*

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Tuesday, August 20: 1 Thessalonians 1

Knowing some of the culture in Thessalonica (from Acts 17), when Paul speaks of "endurance"(v.3) and "severe suffering"(v.6) we can appreciate what he is saying. This is not an easy city in which to follow Jesus.

- Paul encourages us that "God has chosen you" – what does it mean to you that God has chosen you? Have you ever reflected on that truth? Spend some time appreciating His love for you.
- His gospel comes to us "not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit" – what does that mean to you? The Holy Spirit is in you; how does that change how you live?
- Our faith gives us "joy" through the Holy Spirit – is that your experience? How do you experience God's joy? If this is not your experience, how can you cultivate joy?
- The believers are known for their "work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" – is that true of us? What "work produced by faith, labor prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" are you know for? How is this a challenge and an inspiration to you?
- Paul writes, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord" – Paul's own life is an example of faithfulness, integrity, and spiritual maturity that others can use as an example. Paul is not perfect, but he can hold up the trajectory of his life – toward becoming more and more like Jesus – as a model worth following. Is that true of your life? Someone does look up to you as an example of faithfulness: you do not need to be perfect. But God is encouraging you to make it your aim to be more and more like Jesus.

"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" writes Paul. An idol is something, anything – other than God – that is most important in your life. It may be a dream, a person, a possession (or something you don't have yet but badly want), a hobby, a job, an investment, a lifestyle, a retirement hope ... It is something that controls your decision making and shapes your life. Our idols are powerful forces that shape our lives, but ultimately – inevitably – disappoint us.

An African proverb says, "A stick in the swamp is not a crocodile" – simply going to church or reading the Bible doesn't make us Christian. It takes a complete turning to God – a deep commitment to following Him – that gives us the joy, hope, and confidence we need to make it through our lives. What influences you more than God? Are there any idols you need to turn from? They will disappoint you. What do I need to change?

*We have heard your glorious whisper, almost silent, yet insistent,
Breaking through the chatter of many voices,
The clatter of background noises, the wind, the rain, storm and hurricane,
Through all of this Your voice remains, unchangeable,
Cuts through to heart and soul, unmissable.
'Come follow me, pick up the Cross ...
My burden is no burden at all,
It is simply love, poured out for you and through you,
Sustaining, Empowering ... Come follow me'
Amen*

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Wednesday, August 21: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

"You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches (in Judea/Israel) suffered from the Jews" (v.14) – this was true in Thessalonica, wasn't it? Suffering was part of the experience of the early Christians. The Christians in Judea suffered persecution (Paul had been part of that). Paul and his companions had suffered throughout Asia Minor (now Turkey) and Greece (Philippi). Down the road the suffering would increase, rather than decrease, under emperors like Trajan and Nero.

Sometimes we are given the impression that if we become Christians, our lives will suddenly become peaceful, safe, and blessed (financially, health-wise, etc., etc.). Sometimes we are blessed in these ways by God – thank Him; enjoy those moments. But other times life continues to be difficult. But God gets us through. Paul and his friends went through horrendous experiences, but did so keeping themselves "*holy, righteous and blameless*" (v.10). Through all their own personal pain, they loved the believers in Thessalonica as if they were their own children, "*encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory*" (v. 11-12).

When life is good it is easy to forget about God. When life is tough we are forced to depend upon His Spirit every moment of every day. Paul's challenge to us is to stay close to the Lord during the good and the hard times – stay "*holy, righteous and blameless.*"

The Jewish wisdom book, *Ecclesiasticus*, familiar to Paul and his friends, contains this wisdom: "*My child, if you would fear the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal. Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when disaster comes. Cling to him and do not leave him, so that you may be honoured at the end of your days. Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainty of your humble state, be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation. Trust him and he will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in him. You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not turn aside for fear you fall. You who fear the Lord, trust him, and you will not be robbed of your reward. You who fear the Lord, hope for good gifts of his, everlasting joy and mercy. Look to the generations of old and see: whoever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? Or whoever, steadfastly fearing him, was forsaken? Or whoever called to him and was ignored? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful, he forgives sins and saves in time of distress*" (2:1-11).

Paul also challenges us to reach out and care for others, even when we feel needy. The best antidote to our own suffering and pain is to care for others. Encourage, comfort and urge others to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into His kingdom and glory.

*As I adventure with you today, be the compass that guides me,
the light that shines on my path, the only one I follow.
As I adventure with you today, be the word that encourages,
the hand that reaches out, each time I stumble
As I adventure with you today, let me glimpse our destination,
and appreciate the places through which you lead me.
As I adventure with you today, be the strength I need to follow,
and as the day draws to a close, let me rest in your embrace.
Amen*

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Thursday, August 22: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5

Yes, life can be difficult. Paul and Silas were forced out of Thessalonica after being there less than a month. Their critics followed them to Berea. In Athens and Corinth they continued to experience opposition.

We need to be honest with ourselves and other people. Problems come. Difficulties happen. Sickness and death are real parts of life. In a rather cynical statement, in the movie, *The Princess Bride*, one character muses, "*Life is pain: anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell you something.*" That might be a bit too hardnosed. But it has some truth to it. Oswald Chambers writes, "*God does not waste suffering, nor does He discipline out of caprice. If He plows, it is because He proposes a crop.*"

Sometimes we present the good news of the gospel too much the opposite way: we suggest that if you believe in Jesus life will be so good – in terms of health, wealth, and other things like that. We may present a Jesus who wants us all to be rich, well-fed, perfectly healthy, and enjoying the comforts of life.¹⁴ But when people experience the pain of real life, their faith can't cope with reality. What do you do when you've been promised that being a Christian guarantees you all the comforts in this world ... and it doesn't happen? Paul is worried that somehow the Thessalonians Christians had got this message and might fall away from following Jesus, disillusioned.

Writing later, Paul will say, *"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ... We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."* (2 Corinthians 4:8-17) When hard times come (and they will) be encouraged that God is with you through them all. Your light and momentary troubles are achieving for you an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

*In our anxiety, fear and uncertainty,
when hearts are heavy with the load we bear,
and there is no one to turn toward but you;
yours is the peace that calms,
the peace that comforts,
the peace that gives us strength to carry on.
Yours is the voice we long to hear,
the persistent whisper in our ear,
'Be still, and know that I am God'.
Yours is the presence in the dark that banishes our fears.
Yours is the hand that guides,
the footprints in which I walk.
In our anxiety, fear and uncertainty,
in confidence we turn to you.
Amen*

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Friday, August 23: 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Paul is worried the Thessalonians have either given in to the pressures around them or they have become disillusioned by the fact that they are suffering, despite their faith (in fact, they are suffering because of their faith). The truth is that the Thessalonians are standing firm. They are faithful to God. Wonderful.

They are resolute in their faith, but there are still things they need to learn. Paul longs to come and *"supply what is lacking in their faith"* (v.10). They can always learn more – about Jesus, about Scripture, about God – and about how their faith relates to the challenges of daily life.

As we live through new challenges and new experiences, we wrestle with how our faith shapes how we live in these times. We all need to keep learning. Being a disciple/follower/student of Jesus is a lifelong process of being teachable – by the word of God, by other mature Christians, and directly from the Holy Spirit.

- Are you a teachable person?
- Do you wrestle through how your faith shapes your life?
- Do you ask questions about how you could or should respond to personal, civic, and international issues as a Christian?
- Do you pray about how we can make a difference in our community?

¹⁴ This is a uniquely North American version of the good news. It gives us spiritual permission to enjoy the self-indulgence and hedonism of our culture. It may have an initial appeal in poorer countries, but it doesn't last – because it isn't true to people's lived experience. This "health and wealth" theology certainly runs contrary to Jesus' own life and lifestyle, the experience of Paul, the Thessalonians, and most early Christians. And it makes a mockery of Jesus' warnings about wealth and further teachings in the Old and New Testaments.

- Are you restless, thinking you can do something for the Lord?

This kind of "holy discontent" is good. It keeps us growing – invigorated – spiritually.

Paul wants to come alongside his friends to help them learn how to live their faith . What we desperately need are people who will step us as mentors – encouragers, teachers, and friends – who will help people younger in their faith, grow and mature.

Is there someone you can help to grow, spiritually? Do you feel like you want to encourage someone? We can help you make a connection ...

*We have a call.
To be loved and to love.
To be shown mercy and to show mercy.
To be forgiven and to forgive.
To receive hope and to offer hope.
To know joy and share joy.
To feel peace and bring peace.
To be made whole and offer wholeness.
We have a call
Listen ... Listen ...
Do you hear?
Amen*

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Saturday, August 24: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

Listen to Paul's counsel:

- *"Live in a way that pleases God ..."*
- *"God's will is for you to be holy ..."*
- *"Love each other ..."*
- *"Live a quiet life, minding your own business ..."*

(Why would this have been particularly good counsel in Thessalonica [remember Acts 17:1-9])

Twice he adds words to the effect that, *"You live this way already, and we encourage you to do so even more."* Just as following Jesus is a matter of life-long learning, it is also a matter of life-long improvement. We are not perfect yet – we never will be. The challenge is never to give up and say, *"I'm good enough,"* or *"I have arrived,"* or *"I know what I need to know to live as a Christian; I can stop learning and thinking now."* We all face new challenges that push us to think through how our faith shapes our decisions and our lives. Constant and never-ending improvement is what we are called to.

"Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live ..." As we are genuine about our lives – honest about the fact we are not perfect yet – but sincere in our desire to improve and keep learning, people will see the reality of God's work in our lives. People do not expect us to be perfect. They can accept our problems ... when we admit them honestly. And they respect us when we have the integrity to recognize our weaknesses and when they see our resolve to keep on aiming for godliness, holiness, and integrity.

"God's will is for you to be holy ... You live this way already, but do so even more."

*In my journeying with you, may I never lose my sense of direction,
never lose sight of the landmark towards which I travel.
And should cloud or rain obscure my vision, may I draw closer to you,
so that my feet may tread in your footsteps,
your words be my encouragement, and your love my protection
against the storms that assail me.
Amen*

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Sunday, August 25: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

One of the issues in the church in Thessalonica concerned the fate of some of their fellow believers who had died. Paul's answer is simple: Jesus died but was raised to life again (resurrection). In the same way we will die but be raised to life again (we will be resurrected, too).

In v.15-18, Paul encourages the Thessalonians that our future hope is that *"we will be with the Lord forever"* (v.17). A lot has been made of what this might look like, how this will transpire, and what our personal experience will be.¹⁵ Paul's point in this passage is not to deal with practical, technical questions like when and how a "rapture" (which is a word NOT found in Scripture anywhere) might take place. As one writer reminds us, *"Christian language about the future is a set of signposts pointing into a mist. Signposts don't normally provide you with advance photographs of what you'll find at the end of the road, but that doesn't mean they aren't pointing in the right direction"* (N.T. Wright).

These verses in Thessalonians are absolutely true about what they tell us about

- *Jesus* – He is resurrected now; He will be personally physically present with His people again one day in the future;
- *Those who have died who believe* – they will be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus;
- *Christians alive when Jesus returns* – they will be *"transformed"* with bodies like those who are resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:41-54; Philippians 3:21); and
- *Our eternal reality* – we will be with the Lord forever.

Paul's concern is a pastoral one: he wants suffering people to know that there will be a resurrection of all people and that ultimately those of us who believe, and our loved ones who believe, will be with the Lord forever. That is good news. Thank God for that tremendous promise.¹⁶

*May the strength of God pilot us,
May the power of God preserve us,
May the wisdom of God instruct us,
May the hand of God protect us,
May the way of God direct us,
May the shield of God defend us,
May the host of God guard us against the snares of evil
and the temptations of the world.
Amen*

Patrick, 389-461

Monday, August 26: 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Paul's words echo the warnings of Jesus: *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard. Be alert. You do not know when that time will come"* (Mark 13:32-33). Jesus uses a variety of parables to talk about this: virgins and lamps, people given talents

¹⁵ Popular "rapture theology" (which is less than 200 years old) being one example. However, rapture theology, as it is usually presented, is difficult to reconcile with other scriptures (also written by Paul) about the future (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:23-54 and Philippians 3:20-21) and Revelation. The speculation and discussion often obscure the real good news here – we will enjoy resurrected bodies in Jesus' presence.

¹⁶ The imagery used here would have been less confusing to Paul's first readers than it is to us. Many of Thessalonian believers were Jewish – steeped in the Old Testament (Acts 17:4) and would easily understand the metaphors Paul is using.

- They would know the story of Moses coming down the mountain after being away a long time, to personally lead and teach his people (Exodus 32). Jesus' return is similar; He will return to lead His people: hopefully they are more faithful than Moses' folks.
- They would know Daniel 7, which describes the persecuted people of God vindicated over their pagan enemies by the coming of *"one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven."* Paul says Jesus' return is similar; He will come back to, be with, save and protect His people during their times of suffering and lead them into a time of resurrection and peace.
- They also lived in a culture where, when a king or emperor came to visit your town, you went **out of your city** to meet him (remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem). You didn't wait in your home until he arrived; that would be very rude. People would go **out** to meet the king and escort him into the city. Jesus, the King of kings, is returning. Paul may be using the imagery of going out (or up) to meet Him, then escorting Him back to our world, as it was a familiar picture of what happened in that day when the monarch came to your region. Paul is emphasizing that Jesus is the rightful King of Kings and Lord of all.

Lots of imagery to think about here. Ultimately Paul's pastoral concern – the truth of Jesus' coming, our resurrection, and His presence is what is most important. Regarding the practical details, times, and how-it-all-happens, we'll just have to wait and see ...

(units of money, not abilities), sheep and goats (all in Matthew 25), watchful gatekeepers (Mark 13:34-37), etc.

Paul uses metaphors to try to speak of this mystery, too. The Lord's return will be like

- A thief coming in the night ... what does that suggest? No warning? What else (think on it)?
- A woman going into labour ... what does that suggest? A surprise? What else (think on it)?

Therefore we should be like a wide-awake, sober person putting on his armour ... what does that suggest? Alertness? Preparation? What else (think on it)?¹⁷

Paul's main concern, again, is pastoral: how should you live knowing Jesus will return, the dead will be resurrected, those who are still living will be transformed, and we will be with the Lord forever?

- Live as a "*child of the light*" or a "*child of the day*" – what does this mean to you?¹⁸
- *Be alert and self-controlled* – in what areas of your life do you struggle with self-control?
- *Let faith and love guard your heart* – do you get overly stressed, worried, fearful ... how does this hurt you? ... how can you work on your understanding of faith and God's love to know His peace and joy?
- *Make the hope of salvation the protection for your mind* ... do you find yourself doubting? Wandering off in strange directions? Struggling with obscure issues? Hold onto Jesus as the anchor of your faith;
- *Encourage one another and build each other up.*¹⁹

*This morning, and all mornings,
as we face the day daunted by expectations others place upon us,
weighed down by burdens, unsure of outcomes,
opposed, alone, afraid;
remind us that you faced all this and more,
that we might loose these chains that bind us,
rise above and beyond the troubles of this world,
and know peace.
To the one who has overcome,
we bring our thanks and praise
Amen*

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Tuesday, August 27: 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28

Paul's final words flow out of verse 11: "*Encourage one another and build each other up ...*" His advice is pretty straightforward. Read it over several times. What is God saying to you?

To help you read this passage with fresh eyes, here it is in Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

"And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love. Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out. Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.

"Don't suppress the Spirit, and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil.

¹⁷ For a good giggle, picture the opposite – a drunken, half-asleep person trying to put on armour – ouch. As the warnings on TV say, "Kids, don't try this at home". ☺

¹⁸ Perhaps think about the opposite – what would a "*child of darkness*" or a "*child of the night*" be like? In contrast then, what would a "*child of the light*" or a "*child of the day*" be like?

¹⁹ "*Just as in fact you are doing*" (5:11) – Paul encourages them that they are already doing this. But we can always do better at this sort of thing, can't we? Paul encourages us toward constant improvement in the same way in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 10.

"May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together — spirit, soul, and body — and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it.

"Friends, keep up your prayers for us. Greet all the followers of Jesus there with a holy embrace. And make sure this letter gets read to all the brothers and sisters. Don't leave anyone out. The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you." The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you, today.

*In my going out and coming in, my rising and sleeping,
watch over me, keep me from harm.
In summer sun and winter rain, joyfulness and sorrow,
watch over me, keep me from harm.
In the darkness and in lighter days, fears and comfort,
watch over me, keep me from harm.
This day, and all days.
Amen*

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Wednesday, August 28: 2 Thessalonians 1

This letter was probably written a few months or a year after 1 Thessalonians. The Thessalonian Christians are having a tough, tough time. As we know, Thessalonica was not an easy city in which to be a Christian. Paul encourages them for their *"endurance and faithfulness in all the persecutions and hardships you are suffering"* (1:4). We don't know what their pain and suffering looked like but it must have been awful.

Good for them that their *"faith is flourishing"* and their *"love for one another is growing"* even in the midst of their struggles. When times get hard it is easy to get disillusioned with God and become bitter, angry, miserable people. The Holy Spirit is clearly at work here – and the people are listening and acting on His promptings: they are staying firm in their faith and growing in love for one another. God will help us through tough times – but we have to keep listening to His voice, AND keep on doing what He encourages us to do.

Paul's prayer is wonderful: *"We keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of his call. May he give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen."*

May this be our prayer for our church: *"Lord, enable us to live lives worthy of Your call. May You give us the power to accomplish all the good things our faith prompts us to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way we live, and we will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ."*

May this be our prayer for ourselves, too: *"Lord, enable me to live a life worthy of Your call. Give me the power to accomplish all the good things my faith prompts me to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way I live, and I will be honored along with him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen."*

*For each step that I might take, be my guide, O Lord of life.
For each load that I might bear, be my strength, O Lord of life.
For each mountain I might face, be my power, O Lord of life.
For each river that might impede, be my safety, O Lord of life.
For each place where I might rest, be my peace, O Lord of life.
For each sunrise and sunset, be my joy, O Lord of life.
Amen*

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Thursday, August 29: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

The Thessalonians latched onto Paul's teaching about Jesus' return (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). But they went too far: they thought it had already happened. Some teachers tried to convince them Jesus had already returned (they wrote a letter, supposedly from Paul, to that effect). As a result some folks were giving up doing anything – if Jesus had returned why bother working anymore? Paul wants to stamp out this error right away.

Paul goes on to talk about a great rebellion against God and the coming of a "*man of lawlessness*" or "*man of sin*" who will deceive many. Just as persecution and suffering are a normal, expected part of life, so are theological tricksters who will use religious jargon to get rich. Downright evil people will arise as well. You can imagine that early Christians were sure this reality was being fulfilled in their time – the Thessalonian Christians (and Christians in many parts of the Empire) were being brutally persecuted, Roman emperors proclaimed themselves gods, later emperors would throw Christians to the lions. These people had every right to imagine these words were coming true in their day.²⁰ But Paul was warning them that it might not be yet ...

Paul's big point is that Jesus is in control. We do not need to be afraid (remember the most common command in the Bible is "*Don't be afraid ...*" or "*Fear not ...*"). No matter how evil some person seems to be or how out of control our situation appears, God is still on top of things. He will be victorious.

This helps us understand that we live in a world where evil is still very real. That is reality. Yes, the Kingdom of God has come – the Holy Spirit is alive and active – but only when Jesus finally returns will all vestiges of evil, suffering, and death be wiped away. In the meantime we live with the dual reality of the Holy Spirit among us (giving us strength, peace, joy, healing, hope, wisdom, guidance, correction, and love) AND evil among us (causing sickness, pain, greed, pride, selfishness, cruelty, and all sorts of other rotten things).

In the end, who wins? God. And God alone. But in the meantime, life can be difficult.

*Lord, we would grow with you,
New shoots reaching out,
Hands stretched upward,
Like leaves newly formed,
Soaking up your light and warmth.
Lord, we would grow with you,
In sunshine and rain,
In darkness and light,
In cold days and summer days,
From Springtime to Winter.
Lord, we would grow with you,
And bring forth fruit, that is pleasing to you,
Fed by your living water,
Giving sustenance to others.
Lord, we would grow with you.
Amen*

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Friday, August 30: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

In light of the reality of evil, pain and suffering in the world, how ought we to live?

- *Stand firm.* God can be trusted. Don't be afraid. When times get tough we can be paralyzed by fear – we can lose sleep, get stressed, panic ... Keep the faith and stand firm.
- *Hold to the truth about Jesus.* Remain firmly grounded with your hope in Jesus and in Him alone. It is

²⁰ People throughout the centuries have tried to "name" this "man of lawlessness" – Roman emperors like Nero were thought to be this character: the Pope, Stalin, Hitler and Osama bin Laden have been named as well. We have to be careful labeling any person or group – or trying to predict Jesus' return – based on our own attempts to read history and impose our interpretation on Scripture. We also have to appreciate that we have no idea when this will take place. Times in the 1st century and even World War 2 were far more severe than now ...

easy to lose sight of what is most important in life – to trust in our investments, relationships, possessions, smarts, strength ... but all of these will eventually fail us. Only God can sustain us. It is easy to listen to fine sounding teachers who promise us health, wealth, and all sorts of nice things. We are encouraged to be like the Bereans who *"received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true"* (Acts 17:11).

Paul has another wonderful blessing for the Thessalonians: *"May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word"* (3:16-17).

Read this as your prayer to God today: *"My Lord Jesus Christ and God my Father, I know You love me and by Your grace You give me eternal encouragement and good hope; please encourage my heart and strengthen me in every good deed and word. Amen."*

*Who is there like you, God of mercy and grace
who loves us as you do?*

*Who knows and understands our actions as you do?
Who hears the thoughts and words of our heart as you do?
Who knows our joys and sorrows and shares them as you do?
Who feels the pain we endure and comforts us as you do?
Who hears as we confess our sins and forgives as you do?
Who takes a broken heart and makes it whole as you do?
Who finds a life that's lost and welcomes it home as you do?*

*Who is there like you, God of mercy and grace
who loves us as you do?*

Amen

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Saturday, August 31: 2 Thessalonians 3

In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul had made a passing comment to the Christians in Thessalonica to *"warn those who are idle."* Apparently this problem – people not working at anything – was getting worse, not better. Paul spends a considerable amount of time pointing out that in God's economy work is a good thing. An essential part of our identity, as creations in the image of God, is work (Genesis 2:15). In fact when we are not busy we can become busybodies (2 Thessalonians 3:11): an old folk saying goes, *"The devil finds work for idle hands."*

The word Paul uses to describe these people (translated *"idle"* in the NIV) means: *"disorderly, undisciplined, without law and order."* The word is used of a soldier who refuses to obey orders. It describes someone who not only doesn't work for a living, but deliberately avoids doing what he ought to do. This kind of person cheats on his taxes, leeches off society by doing the absolute minimum in order to qualify for EI, works the system to get the most from it without contributing anything himself, feels society "owes" him a living ...²¹

Paul is saying that this way of living is not acceptable for the people of God. To the best of our ability we are called to use our gifts, talents, education, resources, and abilities to serve God, to serve our community, and to support ourselves. We were never created to be sponges, sitting back "enjoying the good life" (whatever that is) at others' expense. We were created to be God's stewards, caring for His creation, for our neighbour, and for the world around us.²² Whether we are younger, middle-aged, or older, God has work we can do ...

It is interesting that "retirement" is totally unknown in Scripture. The assumption is that even if we are no longer working at one calling (perhaps paid employment), God has something else for us to do that will benefit

²¹ Of course some people are unable to work for very legitimate reasons – we have to be very compassionate with those who cannot find work, have disabilities, miss opportunities, need further education, etc. Paul is not chastising these people at all. He is taking to task those who are very capable of work, have the skills and the opportunity, but are choosing to be lazy or "work the system" to provide what they could work for. For instance I worked with a fellow who described himself as a member of the "EI Ski Team" – he would work the minimum number of weeks he needed to during the summer, in order to collect EI. Then spent his winters skiing at Whistler. He never even tried to look for work during the winter months. It was his "right" to live this way. This is the kind of person Paul is speaking about here.

²² Having said that, God also created a rhythm of work and rest (Sabbath). He does not call us to be obsessive-compulsive workaholics.

others, our community, and the Kingdom of God. We equate "work" with 9-5 paid employment; God sees work as a calling through which we can serve Him and bless others – paid or unpaid.

"Work is the natural exercise and function of man ... Work is not primarily a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental, and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God" (Dorothy Sayers).

*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 tranquillity 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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Sunday, September 1: Psalm 93

We live. We work. We play. We laugh. We cry. We rejoice. We mourn. We could go on and on listing the various activities and emotions we go through in the course of a day, let alone a year, or a lifetime. Sometimes it feels like nothing is solid. Everything is always changing.

What Revelation and 1 and 2 Thessalonians have reminded us is that God is with us through all of the ups and downs, successes and challenges, victories and tragedies of life. He is always there. He is always with us.

Psalm 93 (and the other psalms we will read over the next few days) reminds us that our God is the great God, Creator of the universe, Master of all, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords. When our lives are in His hands, they are safe and secure.

In the midst of the rolling waves of events and emotions in our lives, we are called to anchor our lives securely in the Lord. There may be peaks and valleys, even whitecaps and storms, but anchored in Jesus we are safe. He never changes. Our God is rock solid.

God is with you. Be encouraged.

*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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