



EXPOSITORY

Commentary

Hebrews – Revelation

ESV Expository Commentary

VOL. XII

Hebrews – Revelation

EDITORS

Iain M. Duguid

James M. Hamilton Jr.

Jay Sklar



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Hebrews
Dennis E. Johnson

2 Peter and Jude
Matthew S. Harmon

James
Robert L. Plummer

1–3 John
Ray Van Neste

1 Peter
Sam Storms

Revelation
Thomas R. Schreiner

ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 12: Hebrews–Revelation

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Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2018

Printed in China

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Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-4335-4672-3

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7631-7

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRD	34	33	32	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	
16	15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4

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PREFACE

TO THE ESV EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

The Bible pulsates with life, and the Spirit conveys the electrifying power of Scripture to those who lay hold of it by faith, ingest it, and live by it. God has revealed himself in the Bible, which makes the words of Scripture sweeter than honey, more precious than gold, and more valuable than all riches. These are the words of life, and the Lord has entrusted them to his church, for the sake of the world.

He has also provided the church with teachers to explain and make clear what the Word of God means and how it applies to each generation. We pray that all serious students of God's Word, both those who seek to teach others and those who pursue study for their own personal growth in godliness, will be served by the ESV Expository Commentary. Our goal has been to provide a clear, crisp, and Christ-centered explanation of the biblical text. All Scripture speaks of Christ (Luke 24:27), and we have sought to show how each biblical book helps us to see the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

To that end, each contributor has been asked to provide commentary that is:

- *exegetically sound*—self-consciously submissive to the flow of thought and lines of reasoning discernible in the biblical text;
- *robustly biblical-theological*—reading the Bible as diverse yet bearing an overarching unity, narrating a single storyline of redemption culminating in Christ;
- *globally aware*—aimed as much as possible at a global audience, in line with Crossway's mission to provide the Bible and theologically responsible resources to as many people around the world as possible;
- *broadly reformed*—standing in the historical stream of the Reformation, affirming that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, taught in Scripture alone, for God's glory alone; holding high a big God with big grace for big sinners;
- *doctrinally conversant*—fluent in theological discourse; drawing appropriate brief connections to matters of historical or current theological importance;
- *pastorally useful*—transparently and reverently "sitting under the text"; avoiding lengthy grammatical/syntactical discussions;
- *application-minded*—building brief but consistent bridges into contemporary living in both Western and non-Western contexts (being aware of the globally diverse contexts toward which these volumes are aimed);

- *efficient in expression*—economical in its use of words; not a word-by-word analysis but a crisply moving exposition.

In terms of Bible translation, the ESV is the base translation used by the authors in their notes, but the authors were expected to consult the text in the original languages when doing their exposition and were not required to agree with every decision made by the ESV translators.

As civilizations crumble, God's Word stands. And we stand on it. The great truths of Scripture speak across space and time, and we aim to herald them in a way that will be globally applicable.

May God bless the study of his Word, and may he smile on this attempt to expound it.

—The Publisher and Editors

CONTRIBUTORS

Editors

IAIN M. DUGUID

PhD, University of Cambridge

Professor of Old Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

JAMES M. HAMILTON JR.

PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Professor of Biblical Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary;

Preaching Pastor, Kenwood Baptist Church, Louisville

JAY SKLAR

PhD, University of Gloucestershire

Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

Authors

MATTHEW S. HARMON

PhD, Wheaton College

Professor of New Testament Studies, Grace College and Theological Seminary

(2 Peter, Jude)

DENNIS E. JOHNSON

PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary

Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

(Hebrews)

ROBERT L. PLUMMER

PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Chairman of the New Testament

Department, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

(James)

THOMAS R. SCHREINER

PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary

James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation,

Associate Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

(Revelation)

SAM STORMS

PhD, University of Texas at Dallas

Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City

(1 Peter)

RAY VAN NESTE

PhD, University of Aberdeen

Professor of Biblical Studies, Director of the Ryan Center for Biblical Studies,
Union University

(1–3 John)

ABBREVIATIONS

General

AT	Author's Translation	lit.	literal, literally
b.	born	LXX	Septuagint
c.	circa, about, approximately	mg.	marginal reading
cf.	confer, compare, see	MT	Masoretic Text
ch., chs.	chapter(s)	n.d.	no date
d.	died	n.l.	no place of publication
diss.	dissertation	n.p.	no publisher
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition	NT	New Testament
e.g.	for example	OT	Old Testament
esp.	especially	par.	parallel passage
et al.	and others	r.	reigned
etc.	and so on	repr.	reprinted
ff.	and following	rev.	revised (by)
Gk.	Greek	s.v.	<i>sub verbo</i> (under the word)
Hb.	Hebrew	trans.	translator, translated by
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place	v., vv.	verse(s)
i.e.	that is	vol(s).	volume(s)
		vs.	versus

Bibliographic

AB	Anchor Bible
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>

- ConcC Concordia Commentary
- JETS *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- LCL Loeb Classical Library
- LSJ Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
- MM Moulton, James H., and George Milligan. *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*. London, 1930. Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997.
- NA²⁸ Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed. Edited by Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce Metzger in cooperation with the Institute for New Testament Textual Research, Munster/Westphalia; German Bible Society, 2012.
- NAC New American Commentary
- NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament
- NIDNTT *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975–1978.
- NIDNTTE *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.
- NIGTC New International Greek Testament Commentary
- NIVAC NIV Application Commentary
- NovT *Novum Testamentum*
- NTL New Testament Library
- PNTC Pillar New Testament Commentary
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 1964–1976.
- TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
- TynBul *Tyndale Bulletin*
- WBC Word Biblical Commentary
- WTJ *Westminster Theological Journal*
- ZECNT Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
- ZNW *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche*

Books of the Bible

Gen.	Genesis	Nah.	Nahum
Ex.	Exodus	Hab.	Habakkuk
Lev.	Leviticus	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Num.	Numbers	Hag.	Haggai
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Zech.	Zechariah
Josh.	Joshua	Mal.	Malachi
Judg.	Judges	Matt.	Matthew
Ruth	Ruth	Mark	Mark
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Luke	Luke
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	John	John
1 Kings	1 Kings	Acts	Acts
2 Kings	2 Kings	Rom.	Romans
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	1 Cor.	1 Corinthians
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	2 Cor.	2 Corinthians
Ezra	Ezra	Gal.	Galatians
Neh.	Nehemiah	Eph.	Ephesians
Est.	Esther	Phil.	Philippians
Job	Job	Col.	Colossians
Ps., Pss.	Psalms	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
Prov.	Proverbs	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Song	Song of Solomon	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Isa.	Isaiah	Titus	Titus
Jer.	Jeremiah	Philem.	Philemon
Lam.	Lamentations	Heb.	Hebrews
Ezek.	Ezekiel	James	James
Dan.	Daniel	1 Pet.	1 Peter
Hos.	Hosea	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Joel	Joel	1 John	1 John
Amos	Amos	2 John	2 John
Obad.	Obadiah	3 John	3 John
Jonah	Jonah	Jude	Jude
Mic.	Micah	Rev.	Revelation

Apocrypha and Other Noncanonical Sources Cited

1 En.	1 Enoch	3 Macc.	3 Maccabees
1 Esd.	1 Esdras	4 Macc.	4 Maccabees
1 Macc.	1 Maccabees	Bar.	Baruch
2 Bar.	2 Baruch	Jub.	Jubilees
2 En.	2 Enoch	Sir.	Sirach/Ecclesiasticus
2 Esd.	2 Esdras	Tob.	Tobit
2 Macc.	2 Maccabees	Wisd. Sol.	Wisdom of Solomon
3 En.	3 Enoch		

HEBREWS

Dennis E. Johnson

INTRODUCTION TO HEBREWS

Overview

Hebrews is unique among the NT documents. Its author describes it as a “word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22), the same Greek expression used to describe Paul’s “word of encouragement” in a synagogue of the Jewish Dispersion (Acts 13:15). Hebrews is probably a sermon composed for a Jewish Christian congregation, showing them from the OT (which God spoke through prophets; Heb. 1:1) that Jesus has fulfilled the promises and shadows given to Israel in the law of Moses, guaranteeing to believers cleansing of conscience and access to God’s throne of grace (9:13–14; 10:19–24; 4:14–16). Hebrews explains both the continuities and the development in redemptive history from the old covenant given at Sinai to the new covenant mediated by Jesus. Hebrews exemplifies how revealed truths concerning Christ’s unique person and redemptive mission establish Christians’ confidence and hope, calling the church to perseverance and mutual encouragement.

Title

Unlike other General Epistles, which bear their authors’ names, the title of Hebrews describes its recipients. Yet the text of Hebrews itself identifies neither its recipients nor their location. The traditional title “To the Hebrews,” traceable to the second century AD, is inferred from the contents or perhaps reflects a tradition transmitted orally from the first generation. The identity of the original recipients as “Hebrews,” Jewish Christians rather than Gentiles, has been challenged (cf. Date and Occasion). On balance, however, evidence supports the ancient title’s claim that this book was originally addressed to Jewish people who had come to faith in Jesus.

Author

Unlike the typical Hellenistic letter (cf. Genre and Literary Structure/Features), Hebrews does not open with the identification of its author. The first recipients no doubt knew him, for he asks them to pray that he may be “restored” to them in the near future (13:18–19, 23) and recalls the specifics of their past and present trials (6:9–12; 10:32–34).

The earliest church tradition, reflected in Papyrus 46 and arguments known to Clement and Origen in Alexandria at the end of the second century AD, associates

Hebrews with the apostle Paul. Clement, however, speculated that Hebrews may have been penned by a Pauline associate, perhaps Luke. Origen, while granting the theological affinity of Hebrews with Paul, concluded that only “God knows” who actually authored the sermon-letter. The mention of Timothy (13:23) and appearance of “Pauline” themes (e.g., Christ’s atoning death and the new covenant) have been cited as supporting Pauline authorship. However, a central emphasis of Paul, Jesus’ resurrection, is mentioned rarely (13:20), although it is implied in the motif of Jesus’ “indestructible life” (7:16). Moreover, as John Calvin observed, Paul stressed that his call to apostleship came from the risen Christ himself, unmediated by other humans (Gal. 1:1, 11–17). It is unlikely, then, that Paul would number himself, as the author of Hebrews does, among those who encountered the message of salvation through other apostles (Heb. 2:3). The Muratorian fragment, a seventh-century document that may reflect a second-century original, mentions thirteen Pauline epistles, addressed to seven churches and three individuals. It does not include Hebrews among the Pauline epistles or even among works falsely attributed to Paul.

Another second-century church father, Tertullian of Carthage, proposed Barnabas as the author of Hebrews. Joseph “Barnabas” was a Levite from the Dispersion (Cyprus, specifically), and the nickname assigned to him by the apostles is interpreted as “son of encouragement [*paraklēsis*]” (Acts 4:36). These features would fit the author of a “word of exhortation [*paraklēsis*]” (Heb. 13:22) composed in polished Greek and elaborating Jesus’ fulfillment of the Levitical sanctuary and its sacrifices. Yet Tertullian’s attribution of Hebrews to Barnabas stands alone in the early Christian centuries. Tertullian may be correct, but he does not cite earlier tradition, and none of his contemporaries seem aware of his view.

Other authorship proposals were made centuries later, based strictly on induction from the content and style of the sermon-letter itself, without any claim of external confirmation from early church tradition. Supposed authors include Apollos (Martin Luther), Clement of Rome (Calvin, tentatively), Epaphras, and Priscilla (19th- and 20th-century scholars).

The identity of the human author of Hebrews is, and likely will remain, unknown. We do know some things about him. The Greek masculine participle in “time would fail me to tell” (11:32) implies that the author was male. Along with his hearers, he heard about the salvation Christ achieved through the apostles “who heard” the Lord (2:3). He was fluent in literary Hellenistic Greek and a skillful interpreter of Scripture who used the Greek Septuagint (LXX). He could assume his pastoral authority among the sermon-letter’s hearers. Although we, at a distance of twenty centuries, do not know who he was, this would probably not concern him. At one point he mentions a human author of Scripture to make a point about chronology (4:7), but his dominant concern is that we attend to Scripture and the authority of its divine author, who spoke long ago through prophets and still speaks in the Son and, after his ascension to heaven, through the Son’s messengers (1:1–2; 2:1–4, 6; 3:7; 12:25–27; 13:7).

Date and Occasion

DATE

Hebrews was probably written before the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Hebrews 10:1–4, 11–14 argues from the ceaseless repetition of animal sacrifices in Israel’s earthly sanctuary that such deaths cannot cleanse worshipers’ consciences. If the temple had already been destroyed, that event would have generated a different line of argument: that the earthly sanctuary and its sacrifices were obviously insufficient, since the temple’s destruction showed that they had been replaced by a “new and living way” into God’s presence, opened by Jesus in his death (cf. 10:19).

On the other hand, it probably was not written *too long* before 70, for the hearers of the letter are described as having embraced the gospel some time ago and therefore as being less mature than they should have been (5:12–14). The greeting conveyed from “those who come from Italy” (13:24) suggests the sermon-letter’s destination was Italy and that these greeters were Italian expatriates sending greetings home.

Some scholars suggest that the suffering that the readers of this letter had earlier endured, including public exposure, imprisonment, and loss of property (10:32–34), might have been associated with the edict of the emperor Claudius expelling Jews from Rome, reportedly in response to turmoil generated by or over someone named Chrestus or entitled Christos, Greek for “Messiah” (c. AD 49; cf. Acts 18:2). Apparently the edict was not imposed on every Jew who resided in the capital, and it may have lapsed after a few years.

When Paul arrived in Rome for adjudication of his appeal (c. AD 60), he found both an established Jewish community and one or more Christian congregations (Acts 28:14–15, 17–28). Although the members of the Hebrews congregation “have not yet resisted to the point of shedding . . . blood” (Heb. 12:4), the author assures them that Christ’s death has freed them from the fear of death (2:15) and reminds them that those who preceded them in the pilgrimage of faith endured both torture and violent death (11:35–38). A composition date for Hebrews in the mid-60s, as Nero’s persecution of Christians in the imperial capital was escalating, is consistent with all of this available evidence.

OCCASION

The occasion of the writing of this letter can be inferred from direct comments addressing the hearers’ situation and spiritual condition and from the sermon’s own argumentation. The addressees began their pilgrimage of faith well when “enlightened” by the gospel, enduring suffering and caring for other sufferers for Jesus’ sake (Heb. 6:10; 10:32–34). At the time of writing, however, some were in danger not only of abandoning the Christian gathering (10:25) but also of renouncing their confession of trust in Christ and his atoning blood (6:4–6; 10:29–30). The sermon argues throughout that Jesus and his redemptive work surpass and replace the means of atonement and access to God, the sanctuary and sacrifices, commanded in the law given to Moses. This argument seems to imply that the

hearers were inclined to look to the institutions of Judaism for assurance of God's forgiveness, as well as for relief from persecution.

There is no mention of circumcision, which would have loomed large if the first audience were Gentiles (as seen in Galatians, Romans, Philippians, Ephesians, Acts, and elsewhere). Thus the hearers probably were not Gentiles being *lured toward* institutional Judaism and its temple but were Jewish followers of Jesus tempted to *return to* the visible sanctuary and its liturgy in Jerusalem, abandoning their confession of Christ's supremacy as eternal High Priest and his sufficiency as the final, conscience-cleansing sacrifice.

Genre and Literary Structure/Features

GENRE

Although Hebrews is typically categorized among the "Catholic" or General Epistles, it lacks features that characterized typical Hellenistic epistles. It does not open with the author's name, the recipients' name/description/locale, or an opening benediction or expression of thanks. The author himself characterizes the book as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). This description highlights the letter's pervasively "hortatory" tone—urging hearers to respond rightly to God's Word. It also signals that the book is to be received as a *spoken* explanation and application of Scripture: a sermon. In the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, Paul's exposition of the OT Scriptures, issuing in a summons to faith, is called a "word of encouragement" (Acts 13:15), employing the same Greek expression rendered "word of exhortation" in Hebrews 13:22. In Paul's directive to Timothy for his ministry in Christian congregations, the reading of Scripture is followed by "exhortation" and "teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13).

Consistent with this sermonic genre, in Hebrews God's Word is conveyed orally by "speaking" or "testifying" and is received by "hearing" (Heb. 2:1, 3; 3:7; 7:17; 8:8; 10:15; 12:25; etc.). Hebrews closes with features often found in epistles: commands on various topics, a request for prayer, a benediction, and final greetings. So the sermon has been adapted for distribution via written correspondence.

STRUCTURE

This sermon is structured by six contrasts¹ between aspects of God's means of relating to Israel under the old covenant, on the one hand, and the superiority of engagement with God that Christ has effected under the new covenant, on the other (cf. Outline). Each section expounds one primary OT passage, argues that Christ's mediatorial mission transcends old covenant institutions, and leads to a specific exhortation. The flow of thought moves from God's speech (revelation) to his provision for our atonement and forgiveness (reconciliation) and finally to the goal of our worship in his holy presence (rest). The author skillfully interlocks sections, unifying the sermon's movement from theme to

¹ No scholarly consensus exists on the structure of Hebrews. This six-part analysis receives partial support from R. T. France, "The Writer of Hebrews as a Biblical Expositor," *TynBul* 47 (1996): 245–276.

theme. As a result, the boundaries between the sermon's sections are not always sharply defined (table 1.1).

TABLE 1.1: Major Sections in Hebrews

Text Boundaries	Christ Is Superior To:	With Reference To:	Primary OT Text (Secondary Text)	Exhortation
1:4–2:18	Angels	Revelation	Ps. 8:4–6	2:1–4
3:1–4:13	Moses	Revelation	Ps. 95:7–11 (Num. 12:7)	3:7–4:13
4:14–7:28	Aaronic priests	Reconciliation	Ps. 110:1, 4 (Gen. 14:17–20)	5:11–6:12
8:1–10:31	Covenant, sanctuary, sacrifice	Reconciliation	Jer. 31:31–34 (Ps. 40:6–8)	10:19–31
10:32–12:17	Promised Land	Rest (inheritance)	Hab. 2:2–4	12:1–17
12:18–29	Sinai	Rest (worship)	Ex. 19:16–23 (Deut. 4:11)	12:25–29

Theology of Hebrews

Hebrews explicitly reaffirms many doctrines revealed throughout the rest of the Bible. God created the universe by his word (Heb. 11:3; cf. 1:10–12) through his eternal Son (1:2–3). OT Scripture is God's very Word, addressed by the Holy Spirit to us (1:1–2; 3:7). The human race is destined to rule over other creatures (2:7–8), but we have sinned and are alienated from God, requiring atonement through a pure sacrifice (2:17; 5:1–3; 9:7, 13–14). We are enslaved by the Devil through the fear of death (2:14–15), and we need salvation from his power (2:3, 10; 5:9; 7:25). This list could go on. The *distinctive* theological contributions of Hebrews are in the areas of Christology, soteriology, the covenantal structure of redemptive history, and the church and its worship.

CHRISTOLOGY

God's Son, Jesus the Christ, is fully divine, infinitely transcending God's angels in dignity (1:2–9) and the entire universe in immutable longevity (1:10–12; 13:8). The Son became fully human, sharing in our flesh and blood, "like his brothers in every respect," in order to become a merciful, faithful High Priest who offered his own life to rescue us from God's wrath and to grant us access to God's presence (2:14–18; 5:5–10; 10:19–22). Having died for his people's sins, Jesus has been raised to an "indestructible life" (7:16) and has ascended to God's right hand in heaven (8:1–2; cf. 12:2), where he lives forever to intercede for those who approach God through him (7:23–25).

SOTERIOLOGY

Hebrews elaborates most fully the priestly aspect of Christ's saving mission, the sermon's central point (8:1). His sufferings during the "days of his flesh" qualify him to represent weak sinners with sympathetic compassion befitting a priest

interceding for his brothers and sisters (2:17–18; 4:14–5:4; 5:7–10). As High Priest he offered himself in death as the final, once-for-all, conscience-cleansing sacrifice of atonement, fulfilling and replacing the endless succession of slaughtered animals associated with the OT sanctuary. Christ has now entered God's heavenly Holy Place and is interceding on our behalf. We await his emergence from the heavenly sanctuary to consummate our rescue from sin and death.

COVENANTAL, REDEMPTIVE HISTORY

Hebrews opens with the theme that God has revealed his Word progressively throughout history, speaking to past generations through prophets but “in these last days” through his Son (1:1–2). This two-age model of history pervades the sermon. Moses testified to “things that were to be spoken later” (3:5). The law's tabernacle and its sacrifices forecast the priestly work of Jesus and its venue in heaven. Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (9:26). By contrast, the rules given to Moses restricting access to the tabernacle's holiest inner chamber in times past were the Holy Spirit's signal that the “time of reformation” had not yet arrived (9:8–10).

Now that Christ has come as High Priest to offer himself as sacrifice, rituals serving as shadows of “good things to come” (10:1) have given way to the realities to which they pointed—the “good things that *have* come” (9:11). God announced in Jeremiah 31 (cited in Heb. 8:8–12) that he would replace the covenant established at Sinai with a new covenant, based on better promises to secure our access to God. Christ's death has inaugurated that new covenant (9:14–15). The new era of God's covenant communion with his people has dawned.

ECCLESIOLOGY AND WORSHIP

Hebrews summons its hearers to view their present situation in light of the pattern of Israel's pilgrimage through the wilderness, from slavery in Egypt to rest in the Promise Land (3:7–4:11; cf. 11:8–10, 13–16; 13:14). Liberation from slavery is a great grace, but in order to enter its blessed destination (variously called “God's rest”; the city with foundations, designed and built by God; the city to come, which abides eternally) the church must persevere in the hope it confesses (3:6; 4:1; 6:11, 18; 10:23–25, 35–39). This endurance demands mutual encouragement and accountability (3:12–13; 12:12–17), and its source is expectant worship and prayer, in which we draw near to God's throne of grace, seeking his timely help (4:14–16; 10:19–22; 12:18–24). As a congregation making its way through wilderness trials toward its promised inheritance, the church must hold fast to its confession by holding together in proactive care for one another.

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

HEBREWS AND THE OT

Hebrews provides the most extensive and detailed NT commentary on the design and significance of the OT sanctuary and the sacrifices offered in it. In other words,

in this sermon the Holy Spirit (cf. 9:8–10) has provided his divinely inspired interpretation of a large section of the law given through Moses (Exodus 25–40; Leviticus 1–25; Numbers 3–9; 15–19; 28–29; Deuteronomy 12; 14–18; 26), as well as of later OT passages addressing the temple (e.g., 1 Kings 5–8; 1 Chronicles 21–26; 28–29; 2 Chronicles 2–7).

A case can be made that Psalm 110 unifies the entire argument of the sermon we know as Hebrews. The psalm presents a royal Messiah, enthroned at God's right hand (cf. Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12). This king is also a priest, fitting the template of the ancient priest-king of Salem, Melchizedek. He serves as priest "forever," his tenure in office secured by God's solemn oath (Heb. 5:6; 6:20; 7:3, 11–28). Thus Hebrews discerns in this psalm (along with Gen. 14:17–20) the union of priestly and royal offices in Christ; the heavenly venue of his present ministry; the completion of his atoning sacrifice, signified by his seated posture; his unending tenure as priest; and the superiority of Jesus' priesthood to Aaron's.

In Hebrews 3:7–4:13, the interpretation of Psalm 95:7–11 shows Israel's forty-year trek through the wilderness to be a pattern of the Christian church's pilgrimage in the new covenant. Thus Hebrews casts light on the significance of wilderness accounts throughout the Pentateuch (cf. also Paul's discussion in 1 Cor. 10:1–13).

Hebrews uses various interpretive methods to demonstrate, from the OT itself, the superiority of Christ to the events and institutions by which God formerly related to Israel. One strategy, employed three times, merits mention here. Certain OT passages imply that benefits God had bestowed on Israel—rest in the Promised Land, the Levitical priests, the covenant made at Sinai—were imperfect and temporary provisions destined to be replaced by even better blessings. If God had not planned for these provisions to become obsolete, Hebrews reasons, then the relevant OT passages would not have led readers to expect superior replacements in the future:

- (1) Hebrews 4:6–8 notes that Psalm 95:7–11, spoken through David long after Israel's conquest of Canaan under Joshua, still urged its ancient audience—already living in the Promised Land—"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts," for if the people of God did so, they would not enter God's rest. "If Joshua had given them rest," the argument continues, then "God would not have spoken of another day later on." So the "rest" promised in Psalm 95 is something more secure and lasting than peaceful residence in Canaan (Josh. 21:44–45; 2 Sam. 7:1; cf. Heb. 11:10, 14–16).
- (2) If priests descended from Levi could have brought Israelite worshipers "perfection" (the cleansing needed to approach God), then Psalm 110:4 would not have spoken of a coming priest who would belong to a different priestly order, that of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:11). Thus the OT itself implies that a priest greater than Aaron would eventually come to "perfect" those who approach God through him (10:14).

- (3) God promised in Jeremiah 31:31–34 to inaugurate a “new covenant,” unlike the covenant established at Sinai, which Israel broke. Hebrews 8:7–13 reasons that, if that first covenant had sufficed, the Lord would not have predicted a later, better covenant—one in which sins are finally forgiven and all of God’s people enjoy direct access to him.

HEBREWS AND OTHER NT BOOKS

Hebrews also displays connections with various NT books, especially in its descriptions of the person and redemptive work of Christ. Like the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1–3) and Pauline texts such as Colossians 1:13–20 and Philippians 2:5–11, Hebrews teaches that the Son is God, was active in the creation of the universe, and uniquely displays the glory of the Father. With the four Gospels and Paul, Hebrews teaches Christ’s full humanity (John 1:14; Phil. 2:6–9), which is essential to his mission as mediator (1 Tim. 2:4–5). Hebrews 5:7 offers a glimpse of Jesus’ anguish in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, recorded more fully in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 26:36–44; Mark 14:32–40; Luke 22:40–46). Hebrews 7:24–25 and Romans 8:34 agree that Jesus now intercedes for believers at God’s right hand.

Preaching from Hebrews

Since Hebrews is probably an early Christian sermon in writing, we should approach this book not only as God’s Word to be preached but also as an example of what and how to preach, especially as we seek to expound a variety of OT passages and their relationship to Christ. Hebrews grounds its message in a careful interpretation of God’s written Word, which, though given “long ago” (Heb. 1:1), continues to “speak” to our hearers today (3:7, 13). Hebrews illustrates that profound theological truths—the mystery of the incarnation and its purpose, the atonement of our sin—are to be taught for practical purposes: to motivate Christians to persevere in faith, mutual encouragement, and the pursuit of holiness.

Preachers of the rich Christology of Hebrews, its typological interpretation of the OT, and its other motifs must follow the book’s homiletic lead, carrying theological exposition through to the response it evokes from believing hearts. While enduring faith is his primary application, our preacher does not ignore believers’ responsibility for one another (3:12–15; 6:10; 10:32–34; 13:1–2), nor our calling to pursue holiness in general (12:14), in sexuality (12:16; 13:4), and in our hearts’ search for security (13:5–6). As deep as his theological and exegetical insights are, the preacher to the Hebrews also exhibits a pastor’s compassionate understanding of his congregants’ spiritual needs and struggles. With a wise blend of gravity and grace, he combines sobering warnings (6:4–8; 10:26–31) with heartening acknowledgments of his hearers’ evidence of genuine faith (6:9–12; 10:32–39).

The original hearers, nurtured in the OT and the worship life of Israel, were profoundly aware of the defiling effects of human sin and the danger God’s holiness poses when he dwells among his people (10:26–31; 12:18–21, 29). Many

listeners today, influenced by postmodern relativism and preoccupation with self-esteem, will need to be gripped by the biblical vision of the living God, supreme in his majesty and purity as “the judge of all” (12:23), in order to grasp the astonishing good news of the atoning work of Christ, which purges consciences and grants access into God’s presence in order to experience his grace.

In view of the theological richness of Hebrews and our hearers’ unfamiliarity with its OT roots, preachers will need to find ways to make its message clear and vivid today. This may require dividing the document into small texts for exposition, but in each sermon we need to keep in view both the wider flow of the book’s argument and the exhortation toward which each phase of the argument is driving.

Interpretive Challenges

HORIZONTAL (HISTORICAL) AND VERTICAL (HEAVEN/EARTH) TYPOLOGY

NT typology characteristically operates along a historical axis, linking events, institutions, offices, and individuals in past history (creation, fall, patriarchs, Israel) to their fulfillments in Christ and his new covenant people, the church. Adam, whose one act of disobedience brought condemnation to all humanity, was a “type of the one who was to come,” namely Jesus, whose obedience in life and death constitutes many as righteous (Rom. 5:12–19). Hebrews reflects the historical trajectory from OT type to NT “antitype” (that to which the type points and in which it is fulfilled); e.g., the ancient king-priest Melchizedek set a pattern for an “order” of priesthood that comprises only one other priest-king, Jesus (Hebrews 7).

But Hebrews adds a “vertical” dimension to this historical typology. Melchizedek could serve as a pattern for the Son who would arrive later in history because he was presented in the OT text in such a way that he “resembled the Son of God,” who lives forever (7:3). Similarly, the ancient tabernacle was a “copy and shadow” of the heavenly sanctuary of God, made visible to Moses on Mount Sinai (8:5). Into that heavenly Holy Place Jesus entered centuries later when he ascended after his death and resurrection. So the temple in which Christ now intercedes is the original, eternal, heavenly sanctuary; the earthly tabernacle and its furnishings were “copies of the heavenly things” (9:23).

APOSTASY THAT CANNOT BE REMEDIED

Among the most controversial and troubling sections of Hebrews are passages that warn of the dire, even irreversible, consequences of apostatizing from faith in Christ (6:4–6; 10:26–31; cf. 2:1–4). The sermon addresses a visible church, some of whose members appear inclined to renounce their confession of reliance on Jesus’ sacrifice and to return to the visible rituals of Judaism. The author warns that those who make such a move have shown such contempt toward God’s Son, his shed blood, and his Spirit of grace that for them “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (10:26), and “it is impossible, . . . to restore them again to repentance” (6:4, 6). These texts pose two soteriological conundrums.

First, such texts seem to contradict the truth taught elsewhere in the NT that those whom God has chosen for salvation, given new life and faith, and justified will persevere in their faith to the end (e.g., John 10:27–29; Rom. 8:28–30). Within Hebrews itself we read that Christ “is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25). However, if Hebrews originates from God, who always speaks truth, these sober warnings can be reconciled with these and other “perseverance” texts. One issue that will be addressed in the commentary is whether the terms describing (potential) apostates’ previous Christian experience (6:4–5: “enlightened,” “tasted the heavenly gift . . . the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,” “shared in the Holy Spirit”) must refer to genuine spiritual rebirth. It must be remembered that our preacher was addressing a congregation that, like ancient Israel in the wilderness, was likely a mixture of genuine believers and others who, though associated with the covenant community, had not responded to the means of grace with genuine faith (4:2).

The second problem concerns the impossibility of restoring apostates to repentance, leading to the forgiveness of their treason against Christ (cf. 6:4–6). Rigorist splinter groups in the early church cited Hebrews in defense of their conviction that no one who had renounced Christ under the pressure of persecution could be readmitted into church membership, however sincere their subsequent repentance seemed to be. The church at large, however, acknowledged that Christ’s grace could cover even such a grave transgression, as Jesus himself had extended mercy to Peter after his three fear-driven denials. Over the centuries, Hebrews 6:4–6 has distressed believers of tender conscience as they have recalled their fluctuating spiritual histories. Without vitiating these passages’ warnings, we can be comforted that none who sincerely turn away from unbelief in heartfelt repentance and faith have crossed the line into irremediable apostasy. See the comments on 6:4–12 for further discussion.

Outline

- I. Prologue: in these last days God has spoken in a Son, who made purification for sins and now reigns at God’s right hand (1:1–4)
- II. Revelation: Jesus is superior to the angels as the agent of God’s speaking (1:5–2:18)
 - A. Instruction: God’s contrasting words to the Son and to angels show the Son’s superiority (1:5–14)
 - B. Exhortation: those who neglect the salvation spoken through the Son will not escape wrath (2:1–4)
 - C. Instruction: the Son became human, lower than the angels, to redeem us, his brothers and sisters (2:5–18)
- III. Revelation: Jesus is superior to Moses as the agent of God’s voice (3:1–4:13)
 - A. Instruction: Jesus, like Moses, was faithful; but Jesus deserves greater honor as Creator and as Son (3:1–6)

- B. Exhortation: the Holy Spirit warns us not to harden our hearts “today” when we hear God’s voice, as Israel did in the desert (3:7–4:13)
- IV. Reconciliation: Jesus is superior to Aaron as the High Priest forever (4:14–7:28)
 - A. Instruction: Jesus, like Aaron, is qualified for priesthood through human weakness and divine appointment (4:14–5:10)
 - B. Exhortation: do not be dull in hearing, but imitate believers who inherited God’s sure promises (5:11–6:20)
 - C. Instruction: Jesus is priest in the order of Melchizedek, greater than Aaron (7:1–28)
- V. Reconciliation: Jesus is superior to the old covenant, its sanctuary, and its sacrifices, for his sacrifice cleanses consciences and brings us near to God (8:1–10:35)
 - A. Instruction: Jesus is the mediator of a new and better covenant, securing forgiveness and access to God (8:1–13)
 - B. Instruction: the earthly sanctuary of the old covenant showed that another route to God was needed (9:1–10)
 - C. Instruction: animal sacrifices, which could not cleanse consciences, showed that another way of forgiveness was needed: the blood of Christ (9:11–10:18)
 - D. Exhortation: draw near to God through Jesus’ blood (10:19–25)
 - E. Warning: no sacrifice remains for those who abandon Jesus (10:26–31)
 - F. Reassurance: remember your early faithfulness amid suffering (10:32–35)
- VI. Rest: Jesus is superior to the patriarchs who greeted their inheritance from afar (10:36–12:17)
 - A. Exhortation: imitate those who pleased God by acting in faith (Heb. 10:36–11:40)
 - B. Exhortation: focus on Jesus and endure hardship as God’s fatherly discipline (Heb. 12:1–11)
 - C. Exhortation: cultivate endurance through Christian community (Heb. 12:12–17)
- VII. Rest: Jesus is superior to Moses, for his blood grants access to the city of the living God (12:18–29)
 - A. Instruction: you have not come to the terrifying Mount Sinai on earth, but to the celebrating Mount Zion in heaven (12:18–24)
 - B. Exhortation: heed God’s voice as he warns from heaven, and worship him with grateful faith (12:25–29)
- VIII. Epilogue: offer pleasing worship as the heirs of God’s unshakable kingdom (13:1–25)
 - A. Exhortation: Show love to brothers and sisters, hospitality to strangers, and compassion to prisoners (13:1–3)

- B. Exhortation: Seek satisfaction of physical needs in submission to God the ever-present judge and helper (13:4–6)
- C. Exhortation: Learn from the example of your past leaders, but rest in the unchanging Christ (13:7–8)
- D. Exhortation: Share Jesus' disgrace and offer sacrifices of praise and generosity (13:9–16)
- E. Exhortation: Respect your leaders and receive God's benediction (13:17–25)

HEBREWS 1:1–4

1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Section Overview: Prologue: God's Last, Best Word in the Son

In Greek, the prologue to Hebrews is one artfully constructed sentence of seventy-two words. It introduces the sermon's central hero and previews his mission of revelation, reconciliation, and rule. The prologue identifies Christ as the Son of God, the agent of God's eschatological revelation. Then a brief participial phrase, "after making purification for sins" (Heb. 1:3), encapsulates the sermon's central point (cf. 8:1): the priestly ministry of the Son in sacrificing himself to cleanse sin-stained people and usher them into God's presence. The prologue concludes with the Son's kingly enthronement "at the right hand of the Majesty on high" and with a contrast between the Son's superior name and the subordinate role of angels, the theme of the sermon's first movement (1:5–2:18).

Section Outline

- I. God's speech (1:1–2a)
 - A. God formerly spoke to our fathers through prophets (1:1)
 - B. God has now spoken to us in a Son (1:2a)

- II. Messianic sonship: the Son was appointed heir of everything (1:2b)
- III. Divine sonship (1:2c–3b)
 - A. In relation to the universe: the Son created the ages (1:2c)
 - B. In relation to God: the Son embodies and displays God's glory (1:3a)
 - C. In relation to the universe: the Son sustains everything (1:3b)
- IV. Messianic sonship (1:3c–4)
 - A. The Son descended as priest to purify our sins (1:3c)
 - B. The Son ascended as king to the heights (1:3d–4)
 - 1. The Son sat down at the majestic God's right hand (1:3d)
 - 2. The Son became superior to angels (1:4)

Comment

1:1–2a Hebrews opens with the God who speaks, a theme that pervades the sermon (2:1–4; 3:7, 15–16; 4:2, 12–13; 6:13; 11:3; 12:25–27). When the living God speaks, his voice is heard in Scripture and in preaching (3:7); “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard” (2:1).

This prologue contrasts the messengers through whom God has spoken throughout biblical history. It opens with a contrast between human prophets who spoke God's Word to Israel and the Son in whom God has spoken “in these last days.” It concludes with a contrast between the Son and angels, who delivered the law to the prophet Moses. Thus the prologue introduces the first two movements of the sermon, which show that, as God's spokesman, Christ is superior to angels (1:5–2:18) and to Moses (3:1–4:13).

The first two clauses are balanced to demonstrate both the continuity (one divine speaker) and the differences between God's self-revelation in the OT and the NT. The Greek word order shows the parallels:

At many times and in many ways

long ago	[epoch]
God spoke	[speech]
to the fathers	[audience]
by the prophets	[messengers]
in these last days	[epoch]
he has spoken	[speech]
to us	[audience]
by his Son	[messenger]

God's OT speech came in many installments and modes: visions, dreams, riddles, and clear “mouth-to-mouth” self-disclosures granted to the patriarchs, Moses, and his prophetic successors (Num. 12:6–8, cited in Heb. 3:2, 5; cf. Hos. 12:10). The piecemeal, multiform character of God's speech to Israel differed from his singular

word spoken in the Son in these “last days.” Hebrews reasons that the plurality of agents and modes in the OT implies imperfection and incompleteness. There had to be many priests in the order of Levi and Aaron because death prevented them from continuing in office (Heb. 7:23), whereas Jesus holds his priesthood permanently and needs no successor (7:16, 20–21, 24). The many animal sacrifices offered in the tabernacle could not cleanse worshipers’ consciences, as Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice has now done (10:1–4, 10). So also, whereas OT revelation came piecemeal over a millennium or more, NT revelation came in one installment, complete in the Son and conveyed by those who heard him (2:3–4).

Like other NT texts (Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Pet. 1:20), Hebrews announces that the “last days” foretold through the prophets have arrived with the incarnation of the Son (cf. Heb. 9:26). God had promised to intervene decisively in history to save and to judge in “the last days” (e.g., Num. 24:14; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; Dan. 10:14; Hos. 3:5). Christ’s life, death, and resurrection have launched those “last days,” delivering believers from the “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). “The powers of the age to come” already operate in the Christian community (Heb. 6:5), yet believers still wait for Christ to “appear a second time” to consummate salvation (9:28).

1:2b–4 Christ is the Son of God in two senses, both of which are indispensable to his revelatory and redemptive mission. The prologue opens and closes with his *messianic sonship* as the incarnate God-man who followed a path of faithful suffering into glory (vv. 2b, 3c–4).

Behind and before Jesus’ messianic sonship is his *divine sonship*. Within the outer “envelope” describing his messianic sonship we find a description of divine sonship with respect to the universe (vv. 2c, 3b) and to God himself (v. 3a). As the divine Son, Jesus carries out his Father’s purposes in creation and providence. Foundational to his role as the universe’s creator and sustainer is the Son’s identity as the “radiance” of God’s glory and “exact imprint” of his substance (v. 3). The prologue’s chiastic (X-shaped) structure makes this the core truth that qualifies the Son to reveal the Father fully.²

1:2b With respect to his messianic sonship, at a moment in history the Son was “appointed heir of all things.” As the eternal divine Son, the Son is and always has been, with the Father and the Spirit, creator and owner of all things. Here, however, the focus is on appointment as *messianic* Son and heir, fulfilling Psalm 2:7–8: “You are my Son. . . . I will make the nations your heritage” (soon to be partially quoted

² The phrases and clauses in 1:2–5 are structured in a chiasm signaled by repetition of terminology:

- (a) Son (v. 2a)
- (b) heir (v. 2b)
- (c) made (the ages) (v. 2c)
- (d) “being” (present participle) (v. 3a)
- (d’) “bearing” (present participle) (v. 3b)
- (c’) made (purification) (v. 3c)
- (b’) inherited (v. 4b)
- (a’) Son (v. 5)

By including verses 1–2a, William Lane and Peter O’Brien discern similar chiastic structures, with verse 3ab at the center point (William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* [Dallas: Word, 1991], 6–7; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010], 45–47).

in Heb. 1:5). The event foretold in Psalm 2:7–8 was the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4), and the reappearance of the terminology of “Son” and “heir/inherit” in Hebrews 1:3d–5 will elaborate on Jesus’ subsequent messianic accession to the status of heir to all that God has made.

1:2c–3b At the prologue’s center are three affirmations of the Son’s divine pre-existence. As we have seen, the first and third pertain to his agency in the creation and preservation of the universe. Between them is a declaration of the Son’s eternal relationship to God the Father (v. 3a).

Like John 1:1–3 and Colossians 1:15–16, Hebrews affirms the Son’s agency in the creation of the world. The statement of the Son’s ongoing rule over the created order, whereby he “upholds the universe by the word of his power,” agrees with Paul’s statement that in Christ “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). Yet the author’s word choice invites hearers to view the physical universe from a *temporal* perspective. The “world” (Heb. 1:2) that was created through the Son is literally “the ages” (*aiōn*; also in 1:8; 5:6; 6:5, 20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; 9:26; 11:3; 13:8, 21). The referent here and in 11:3 is the spatial expanse of the heavens and the earth. But our preacher bypasses *kosmos* (used in 10:5), substituting “ages” to hint that the present heavens and earth are “wearing out” through successive ages (1:10–12; 13:8).

The incarnate Christ uniquely reveals the Father’s glory because he eternally “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (v. 3a). He shares God’s divine being (John 1:1–3, 14; 10:30–33; Phil. 2:5–6; Col. 1:15; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4–6; Rom. 9:5). As early as Origen (early third century AD), commentators have heard here echoes of *Wisdom of Solomon* 7:25–26, which characterizes God’s attribute of wisdom as an emanation of his “glory” and the “radiance” of his light. Unlike that intertestamental book, Hebrews (following Proverbs 8) applies these terms not to the *personification* of a divine attribute but rather to a divine *person*, distinct from yet equal to the Father. “Exact imprint” in extrabiblical Greek was the design on a coin that replicated the die from which it was cast, or the insignia in a wax seal that reflected the stamp impressed into it. Through the images of “radiance” and “exact imprint” Hebrews captures Jesus’ claim that “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

1:3c The prologue takes a decisive turn at “After making purification for sins,” returning to Christ’s messianic sonship and focusing on the priestly mission necessitating his incarnation. Hebrews 2:5–18; 4:14–5:10; 10:5–10 will show why the Son’s assuming human nature was necessary to his priestly ministry in empathy, sacrifice, and intercession. This first glimpse of the sermon’s central theme (8:1) shows the result of Christ’s death: the purification of believers’ consciences (9:14) so that we may approach God in worship (10:19–22).

1:3d–4 Jesus’ reward for his messianic obedience, culminating in his sacrifice for sinners, was his resurrection, ascension to heaven, and enthronement “at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” This allusion to Psalm 110:1 complements the

allusion to Psalm 2:8 in Hebrews 1:2b, since the following series of OT passages in Hebrews 1 will open with Psalm 2:7 and close with Psalm 110:1, which will also reappear throughout the sermon (Heb. 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). The more excellent “name” that Christ “inherited” through his redemptive mission is the title “Son” (Ps. 2:7), addressed to him at his resurrection from the dead (cf. Acts 13:33). Angels replace the human prophets with which we began for two reasons: (1) angels delivered the law to the prophet Moses (Heb. 2:1–4), and (2) the divine Son became “lower” (Ps. 8:5) than angels through his incarnation in order to save his siblings, the offspring of Abraham.

Response

The preacher to the Hebrews exhorts his hearers to hold fast to their confidence in Jesus (10:35–39), “the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1). Such endurance can come only from a deepened grasp of the majesty of the Son in whom God has spoken his final, finest word. This sermon will fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith (12:2). Faithfully confessing the identity of Christ is a matter of spiritual life or death! This opening sentence refutes Christological heresies that deny the full deity of the Son (adoptionism, Arianism, etc.). Later sections of Hebrews will expose the error of denying his true humanity (docetism, Apollinarianism, etc.).

The Son’s threefold mediatorial office (prophet, priest, king) guides our response. He is the definitive spokesman sent from God, so we must hear and heed his voice in the Scriptures as they are read and preached. He is the priest whose sacrifice purifies our defiled consciences, so through him we may and must draw near to God’s throne of grace. He is the king enthroned at God’s right hand, so we rejoice in his royal victory over the Devil (2:14) as we are the fulfillment of God’s promise to the priest-king at his right hand: “Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power” (Ps. 110:3).

OVERVIEW OF

HEBREWS 1:5–2:18

The prologue’s concluding affirmation that the Son surpasses the angels leads to an extended discussion of the relationship of the Son to the angels. First, a series of seven OT quotations shows the Son’s superiority to angels in terms of his title (1:5), their obligation to worship him (1:6), their servant role (1:7), his divine reign (1:8–9) and immutability (1:10–12), and, finally, his enthronement at God’s right hand (1:13). A concluding comment on the angels reaffirms their role as servants to those who will inherit salvation through the Son (1:14). Second, the core exhor-

tation of this section (2:1–4) shows the preacher’s purpose in contrasting the Son to the angels: God’s word came through both—the law through angels at Sinai, and the word of salvation through the Lord (the Son) in his incarnation. Third (2:5–9), at his incarnation the Son assumed human nature, becoming for a little while lower than angels, fitting the description of humanity in Psalm 8:5–7. The purpose of the Son’s voluntary condescension was to “[bring] many sons to glory” (Heb. 2:10) by destroying the one who enslaves his human “brothers” (2:11–16), making propitiation for their sins, and providing aid as their merciful and faithful High Priest (2:17–18).

HEBREWS 1:5–14

⁵For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”?

Or again,

“I will be to him a father,
and he shall be to me a son”?

⁶And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God’s angels worship him.”

⁷Of the angels he says,

“He makes his angels winds,
and his ministers a flame of fire.”

⁸But of the Son he says,

“Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,
the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.

⁹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.”

¹⁰And,

“You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;

- ¹¹ they will perish, but you remain;
 they will all wear out like a garment,
¹² like a robe you will roll them up,
 like a garment they will be changed.¹
 But you are the same,
 and your years will have no end.”

¹³ And to which of the angels has he ever said,

“Sit at my right hand
 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet”?

¹⁴ Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those
 who are to inherit salvation?

¹ Some manuscripts omit *like a garment*

Section Overview: Scripture Shows the Son's Superiority to Angels

The Son's superiority to angels, asserted in Hebrews 1:4, is now demonstrated through a series of seven quotations from the OT, strung together with minimal (but sometimes significant) introductions. This rapid-fire citation of Scripture heightens the dichotomy between the way God has spoken to and about his Son and the way he has addressed and described angels. The Son's superiority to angels is emphasized not only by the content of the citations but also by the disparity in their number: five concern the Son, while only two concern the angels.

The OT texts are grouped in two sets of three, followed by a final OT quotation about the Son and a summative description of the angels' role. In the first triplet, two passages highlight the exalted title “Son,” and then one summons the angels to worship him. In the second set, one text shows the angels' role as creaturely servants, and then two illustrate the eternal reign of the Son, who is “God,” and his divine immutability as creator and “Lord.” The OT testimonies follow the order of the prologue: the Son as royal heir (Heb. 1:2b, 5–9) and mediator of creation (vv. 2c, 10), his eternal divine nature (vv. 3ab, 11–12), and his exaltation to God's right hand (vv. 3d, 13).³ The seventh OT quotation, like the first, is introduced with the rhetorical question, “To which of the angels has he ever said . . . ?” The form of the question in Greek demands a negative answer (“none”), thus implying the Son's unique superiority. Its repetition in verse 13 signals the conclusion of the sequence of citations that began in verse 5.

The motif of God's speech, which opened the prologue, appears throughout. The introductions to OT citations assume that what Scripture says, God says (1:5, 6, 7, 13; implied in 1:8, 10). Because these passages are understood as *God's* declarations to and about the Son (and the angels), they make the case for the Son's superiority. The preacher's agenda in showing the Son's superiority to angels will become clear in the sermon's first exhortative section (2:1–4).

³ Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8, 22.

Section Outline

- I. In OT Scriptures, God addresses the Messiah as Son and commands angels to worship him (1:4–6)
 - A. God addresses the Messiah as the unique Son (Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14) (1:4–5)
 - B. God commands angels to worship the exalted Son (Deut. 32:43 and/or Ps. 97:7) (1:6)
- II. In OT Scriptures, God calls the angels serving spirits and calls the Son both God and Lord (1:7–12)
 - A. God calls angels serving spirits, who share creation's mutability (Ps. 104:4) (1:7)
 - B. God addresses the Son as God, reigning forever, and as immutable Lord (Pss. 45:6–7; 102:25–27) (1:8–12)
- III. In OT Scriptures, God has invited the Son to sit enthroned in supreme power, while angels serve the human heirs of salvation (1:13–14)
 - A. God invited the Son to sit at his right hand (Ps. 110:1) (1:13)
 - B. God sends angels to serve the human heirs of salvation (1:14).

Comment

1:5 The preacher points out that it was not angels but the divine and messianic Son described in the prologue who was addressed in the words of Psalm 2:7. It is important to note that our preacher probably selects his OT texts not only for the words they contain but also for their context. Psalm 2, for instance, opens with an international conspiracy against the Lord and his anointed king, an insurrection that early believers recognized as being fulfilled in the convergence of Jewish and Roman forces that killed the Christ, fulfilling God's redemptive purpose (Acts 4:25–28). After Christ's suffering, God enthroned and acclaimed him as Son, conferring the nations as his inheritance (Ps. 2:6, 8). Thus this psalm links sonship, inheritance, and enthronement.

These three themes likewise converge in Hebrews 1:2–4 ("Son," "heir," "sat down . . . on high," "inherited"). The NT attributes the title "Son" to Christ with respect to his eternal preexistence (e.g., Gal. 4:4), his incarnation (Luke 1:32, 35), his baptism (Luke 3:22), and his transfiguration (Luke 9:35). Here he "inherited" that "more excellent" name *after* his atoning suffering (Heb. 1:3). This means that the "today" of Psalm 2 is the day of Christ's exaltation, encompassing his resurrection (Acts 13:32–37; Rom. 1:4) and his ascension to God's right hand (Acts 2:32–36).

Reinforcing the testimony of Psalm 2 was God's word to David, delivered through the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 7:14). God promised to be a "father" to David's royal descendant, who in turn would be a "son" to God and would build God's house (2 Sam. 7:12–13). This prophecy's initial fulfillment came in David's royal son Solomon, who built the temple. But the prophecy ultimately looked beyond Solomon, promising an eternal kingdom and throne (2 Sam. 7:16). Generations

of Israelites watched and waited for the offspring of David (John 7:42) who would be the final and forever King, the literal Son of God. Jesus, descended from Judah, David's tribe (Heb. 7:14), is the Son of God who builds and governs God's house (Heb. 3:3–6; 10:21).

1:6 The first citation in this chapter to mention angels relates them to the Son: "Again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" It is possible to construe "again" as signaling *a second moment* when God introduced the firstborn into the world, that is, to Jesus' second coming at the end of history (Heb. 9:28). But the ESV is correct to present "again" as connecting OT quotations logically, not chronologically (cf. "again" in 1:5; 2:13; 4:5; 10:30).

At first glance, the reference seems to be to the Son's incarnation and birth at Bethlehem, announced by angels to shepherds (Luke 2:11–14). But the Greek word translated "world" (*oikoumenē*) is not the one Hebrews uses elsewhere (*kosmos*) when referring to Christ's incarnation (Heb. 10:5; cf. also 4:3; 9:26; 11:7, 38). The word used here reappears in 2:5, "the world [*oikoumenē*] to come, of which we are speaking." This parallel suggests that angels were commanded to worship the Son at his resurrection and ascension, when God brought him into "the heavenly world of eschatological salvation."⁴ "Firstborn" reinforces the "heir" theme (1:2, 4), evoking a firstborn son's preeminence in leadership and inheritance (cf. 1 Chron. 5:1–2). In the OT the term became a metaphor for Israel's special status (Ex. 4:22) and the supremacy of the Davidic monarchy among other kings (Ps. 89:27). In the NT "firstborn" refers to Christ's preeminence as the creator and owner of the universe (Col. 1:15) and as the Resurrected One (Col. 1:18; Rom. 8:29; Rev. 1:5).

The OT source of this citation is unclear. The wording closely resembles a line in the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:43. This line is absent from the Hebrew Masoretic Text, but it appears in the LXX (Greek OT) and in the Deuteronomy scroll found at Qumran. The wording also approximates Psalm 97:7: "Worship him, all you gods!" The LXX renders this verse, "Worship him, all his angels!" Earlier in the psalm, the Lord's coming is accompanied by fire and lightning (Ps. 97:3–4). This imagery describes angels in the next OT citation in Hebrews, from Psalm 104:4. Whichever verse is its OT source, this citation asserts that the Son is worthy of worship by angels.

1:7–12 The second triplet of citations is linked grammatically by Greek conjunctions signaling contrast (absent from ESV): "And *on the one hand*, of the angels he says. . . . But, *on the other hand*, of the Son he says" (vv. 7–8). The quotation about the angels is from Psalm 104:4; the two about the Son (linked by "and"; Heb. 1:10) are from Psalm 45:6–7 and 102:25–27.

1:7 Psalm 104 is a creation psalm that personifies stormy winds and lightning as the Lord's obedient messengers, serving his sovereign purpose. In Hebrew and

4 Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8, 27. Also O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 69; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 79. Cf. also 1 Timothy 3:16.

in Greek one word (*ruakh* and *pneuma*, respectively) refers both to physical winds and to immaterial spirits. Our preacher capitalizes on this providential linguistic ambiguity to argue that, as winds and lightning serve God's purposes in nature, so God's spiritual messengers also fill a servant's role. The previous psalm (103:20–21) encouraged this identification of "angels" as God's personal spiritual servants, since it closed by addressing the Lord's "angels" and "ministers" (terms to reappear in Ps. 104:4) who do his word and will. Their servant role differs sharply from the Son's royal rule, as Psalm 45 attests. Moreover, as creatures they are as ephemeral as wind, whereas the Son is the changeless Creator, as Psalm 102 affirms. Key terms from Psalm 104:4 will reappear in Hebrews 1:14, where the angels' role as servants is contrasted with the Son's enthronement.

1:8–9 Psalm 45, celebrating a royal wedding, extols the bridegroom. At verse 6 the psalmist daringly addresses the Davidic descendant: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." The attribution of deity to a human king is so shocking that interpreters have sought a more acceptable alternative, such as reinterpreting this phrase as "Your throne is God" or treating verse 6 as addressed to God and verse 7 to the king. But the most natural reading of the Hebrew and LXX syntax is that "God" is indeed a vocative addressed to the king, whose throne is forever and ever. His God has anointed him above his companions. In this OT text, therefore, a host of significant themes converge. A king who is the "radiance of the glory of God" (Heb. 1:2–3) deserves to be addressed as God. An eternal throne befits a king who lives forever (7:16–17, 24). His love of righteousness is demonstrated in his holy life (7:26) and, as we will see, is expressed in the name of Melchizedek ("king of righteousness"; 7:2), the ancient priest-king whose order Christ fulfills. The psalm brings into view the Messiah's "companions" (Gk. *metochoi*; 1:9) as well. Our preacher will later call his hearers the "companions" of the Anointed One (that is, those who "have come to share" in him; *gegonomamen metochoi*, 3:14), and Jesus calls them his brothers (2:10–12), as he "partook of" (*metechō*, a cognate of "companion") the blood and flesh they share (2:14).

1:10–12 Psalm 102, quoted here, is a lament over human suffering, weakness, and mutability (Ps. 102:1–11, 23–24), but God's faithfulness gives the psalmist hope that his suffering and Israel's disgrace will be reversed (Ps. 102:12–22). The psalm concludes with the verses cited in Hebrews (Ps. 102:25–27), extolling the Creator who is eternal, infinitely more permanent than the heavens and earth he fashioned. The heavens and earth will wear out and be discarded, but the Creator of the ages (cf. Heb. 1:2) remains unchangeably "the same, and your years will have no end" (1:12). The divine immutability of the Son is crucial to his priestly office and ministry, which rests on the power of his "indestructible life" (Heb. 7:16, 23–25). Although the congregation's human leaders come and go, "Jesus Christ is *the same* yesterday and today and forever" (13:8). He bestows on believers a city that lasts (13:14), an unshakable kingdom that will survive the final cataclysm of the present heaven and earth (12:26–28).

1:13 The chain of OT citations showing the Son's superiority climaxes with Psalm 110:1, to which the prologue alluded (Heb. 1:3). The theme of the Son's enthronement links Hebrews 1:13 with Psalm 45:6–7, which is quoted in Hebrews 1:8–9. Psalm 110, especially verses 1 and 4, is interwoven throughout Hebrews (Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 17, 21; 8:1; 10:12–13; 12:2). This psalm was recognized as messianic in the Judaism of Jesus' day, so Jesus cited it to confute his opponents' assumption that David's royal heir would be merely human (Mark 12:35–37). Jesus' heavenly enthronement at God's right hand is mentioned repeatedly throughout the NT (e.g., Acts 2:34; 1 Cor. 15:24–28). Our preacher will cite these words to show: (a) the heavenly *place* of Jesus' present priestly ministry, which is superior to the earthly sanctuary (Heb. 8:1–6; cf. 9:11–12), and (b) his seated *posture*, demonstrating the complete sufficiency of his atoning sacrifice (10:11–14).

1:14 A final rhetorical question (now expecting an affirmative answer in Greek) reaffirms the angels' subservient mission, in contrast to the Son's enthronement at God's right hand. "Ministering" and "spirits" (winds) echo Psalm 104:4, cited in Hebrews 1:7 (cf. also Ps. 103:20–21). While the Son *sits* in heavenly sovereignty (Heb. 1:13), the angels are *sent out* to serve. They serve "those who are to inherit salvation" through the Son. So our preacher brings us into the picture: Believers are the Messiah's "companions" (v. 9). He is the unique Son, firstborn heir of all things (1:2–5), yet they are his "brothers" and heirs of the salvation he has achieved, for through him God is "bringing many sons to glory" (2:10–12; cf. also 6:12, 17; 9:15; 11:7–9; 12:23).

Response

Speculation runs rampant concerning the involvement of angels in human experience, whether we speak of the Judaism of Jesus' day, ancient or recent paganism, global animism, or the supposedly "disenchanted" West, in which fascination with "spiritual" phenomena persists despite the dominance of naturalistic secularism. God's Word affirms the reality of a realm of unseen spiritual forces who influence our lives (Gen. 19:1–15; 2 Kings 6:15–17; Job 1; Ps. 91:11; Matt. 18:10; Acts 10:3; 12:7–8; Heb. 13:2), but Scripture is sparse in details about their activities. The biblical writers' reticence confirms the point made throughout the OT citations collected in Hebrews 1: We can appreciate angels' service, but our hearts' allegiance must belong to the Son.

The Son's status as king underscores how imperative it is that we heed, trust, and obey his word—to "pay much closer attention to what we have heard" (Heb. 2:1). The king's love of righteousness and hatred of wickedness set the pace for his companions' affections and actions. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by rapid social change, political disruption, natural disaster, or personal tragedy, our only secure foundation is the Lord, who remains the same, whose years have no end.

HEBREWS 2:1–4

2 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, ³how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, ⁴while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Section Overview: Pay Close Attention to the Lord's Word of Salvation

The chain of OT testimonies demonstrating the Son's superiority to the angels (Heb. 1:5–14) has been moving toward a goal: the exhortation to heed the message God has spoken through the Son (2:1–4). This first of many exhortation sections (3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–31; 12:1–17; 12:25–29) in this “word of exhortation” (13:22) contains a grave warning of the consequences of drifting away from the salvation achieved and announced by Christ. The greater the dignity of the messengers whom God sends, the greater the punishment for ignoring the message. If disregarding God's word spoken “long ago” through angels at Sinai brought punishment, all the more does ignoring the “last days” message spoken in the Son have eternally disastrous consequences.

Section Outline

- I. Exhortation: let us hold fast to the word we have heard from God through his messengers (2:1)
- II. Rationale: the relative dignity of God's messengers shows the relative gravity of their messages (2:2–4)
 - A. The word of law spoken through angels (2:2)
 1. Covenant confirmation
 2. Covenant curse
 - B. The salvation spoken through the Lord (2:3–4)
 1. Greater covenant curse: no escape! (2:3a)
 2. Greater messenger: the Lord (2:3b)
 3. Covenant confirmation through witnesses (2:3c–4)
 - a. The Lord's hearers (2:3c)
 - b. God the covenant witness (2:4)

Comment

2:1 “Therefore” signals the connection between the scriptural case for the Son’s superiority to angels (1:4–14) and the response that the hearers must offer. Although sometimes characterized as a “parenthesis” or “digression” from the theological argument, this exhortation, like others in this sermon-letter, is the *purpose* toward which the biblical-theological argument was driving. Here the preacher includes himself with his hearers in his admonition: “We must pay . . . attention” (cf. also 4:1, 11, 14–16; 6:1; 10:19–27; 12:1, 28; 13:10–15; cf. 3:6, 14; 12:25). Elsewhere he addresses the readers in the second person: “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of *you* an evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12; cf. 3:1, 13; 5:11–12; 6:10–12; 10:32–36; 12:4–8, 18–25; 13:1–9, 16–19). As a brother he stands alongside his hearers, but he also addresses them with pastoral authority.

The term translated “pay attention” frequently had this general sense of giving heed to something of import (e.g., 7:13; Luke 21:34; 1 Tim. 4:13). Here it is contrasted with a verb meaning to “drift away,” describing a ship loosened from its mooring and at the mercy of strong currents. Our preacher later evokes the nautical image of an anchor (Heb. 6:19), so here too he may be imploring his readers to be like a vessel secured to its dock, not slipping away from its safe haven. Hebrews will repeat the imperative to hold fast one’s confession and strengthen others whose commitment is wavering (3:6, 12–14; 4:11, 14; 6:18; 10:23, 35–36; 12:1, 12–15; 13:9).

2:2–4 The exhortation is reinforced with a sobering warning that uses a form of reasoning well known among ancient rhetoricians, called *a fortiori* by the Romans and *qal v’homer* (“light and heavy”) by the Jewish rabbis. The logic of this form of rhetoric is simple: since a cause of lesser importance will yield a given outcome, a cause of greater importance will yield a correspondingly greater outcome. Later our preacher will reason that, whereas animal sacrifices could effect external, ritual cleansing, “how much more” will the blood of Christ purify our conscience (9:13–14). Here, however, the logic yields a sobering conclusion (as in 10:28–29): if the law delivered to Moses by angels mandated just punishment for its violators, an unspeakably graver penalty must await those who disregard the message of salvation now spoken through God’s Son. The exalted dignity of angels showed the gravity of transgressing the word spoken through them. The infinitely higher dignity of the Son, who is Lord, means that those who “neglect”—who show no lasting commitment to—the great salvation that came through him cannot expect to escape the eternal wrath of God.

2:2 Angels are not mentioned in the account of Moses receiving the law at Sinai (Exodus 19–40), but Moses later recalled the covenant inauguration on Sinai like this: “The LORD came from Sinai; . . . he came from the ten thousands of holy ones, with flaming fire at his right hand” (Deut. 33:2). Ancient Jewish sources (*Jub.* 1:26–2:1; rabbinic statements; and Josephus, *Antiquities* 15.136) mention the tradition of angels delivering the Lord’s word to Moses. This tradition receives NT confirmation in the speech of Stephen (Acts 7:53) and in Paul’s letter to the

Galatians (Gal. 3:19). The angels' presence on Sinai underscored the holiness of the covenant inaugurated there.

The term here rendered “reliable” (*bebaios*) elsewhere has the general sense of firmness (Heb. 3:14; 6:19). Here it has a more legal sense, indicating the ratification of a covenant between God and his people. It reappears in 9:17, which describes the function of sacrificed animals (symbolizing the sanctions enforcing mutual loyalty) in the “taking effect” of a covenant’s legal obligations (cf. comments on 9:15–20). The “just retribution” suffered by violators of the covenant made at Sinai and the worse judgment awaiting those who spurn the new covenant will be explained in 10:26–31.

2:3–4 The superiority of God’s final message is shown not only in its messenger (the Lord) but also in its contents (“such a great salvation”). In 1:14 our preacher spoke of “those who are to inherit salvation.” Salvation entails cleansing from sin’s guilt and defilement, so that we may draw near to God (7:25). It includes rescue from the Devil, who has the power to inflict death and to enslave us in fear (2:14–15). But it also encompasses God’s bringing his sons to glory as heirs of the world to come (2:5–8, 10). Jesus is the founder and source of this salvation, through his suffering (2:10; 5:9).

Our preacher and his audience did not hear the word of salvation firsthand from the Lord during his earthly ministry. (See Introduction: Authorship.) Instead the salvation-word, having been spoken first through the Lord, “was attested to us by those who heard.” “Attested” reflects the verb (*bebaioō*) cognate to the term referring to the “reliable” covenant confirmation in verse 2. Reliable new covenant revelation, spoken by and about the Son, is conveyed through the apostles to succeeding generations of the church (Luke 1:1–4). Paul therefore calls the apostles and prophets, through whom God revealed his redemptive mystery, the “foundation” of God’s new temple (Eph. 2:20–22; 3:4–5; cf. Rev. 21:14).

The apostles’ testimony is confirmed by God’s own testimony, expressed through signs, wonders, miracles (*dynameis*, acts of power), and the Holy Spirit’s distribution of gifts for service to the body of Christ. God bore witness to the incarnate Son in his earthly ministry through the mighty works (*dynameis*), wonders, and signs that Jesus performed (Acts 2:22; John 5:36–37). After Christ’s glorification, the “signs of a true apostle” legitimized Christ’s apostolic witnesses, including Paul (2 Cor. 12:12).

Thus a fourfold concert of witnesses—the Lord Jesus, his apostles, God the Father testifying through miracles, and the Holy Spirit empowering the church—certifies the message of salvation announced in these last days. Those who taste this good word of God (Heb. 6:5) but then drift away will not escape the destruction that awaits those who commit treason against the Lord of the covenant.

Response

Various influences and pressures lure people away from commitment to Christ. For the Hebrew followers of Jesus who first heard this sermon, factors such as rejection

by family (Heb. 13:12–13), public shame (10:32–33), loss of property and freedom (10:34; 13:3), or the threat of martyrdom (12:3–4) may explain why some neglected meeting together (10:25). Such costs of discipleship still confront the global church today. When faced with such challenges, those who see the supreme glory of Christ find courage to follow the suffering footsteps of OT people of faith, “of whom the world was not worthy,” anticipating a better resurrection and a better and abiding possession (11:35–38; 10:34).

Christians in the West enjoy freedom, safety, and tolerance, yet still some may lose interest in God’s last, best word, spoken in his Son. Their drift toward spiritual shipwreck may not start with storms of life-shaking crisis. Instead, subtle rip currents—career advancement and financial security, entertainment and recreation, reputation and social acceptance—loosen the line linking them to a “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (6:19). Such drift spells eternal ruin. Our preacher has displayed the majesty of the Son in order to guard our hearts against any distraction that would deflect our gaze from him (3:1; 12:1).

OVERVIEW OF

HEBREWS 2:5–18

The OT texts demonstrating the Son’s superiority to angels introduced “those who are to inherit salvation” (Heb. 1:14). This “salvation” reappeared in the first exhortation section (2:1–4). From that exhortation the author now launches a further discussion of the Son’s relationship to angels (2:5–18). The focus turns to his mission on behalf of his human siblings, who inherit salvation because he became “for a little while . . . lower than the angels” in order to suffer and thereby achieve their salvation (2:9–10).

As the OT citations on the Son’s superiority (1:5–14) were “bookended” by the rhetorical question “*To which of the angels* did he [God] ever say . . .” (1:5, 13), so is this section enveloped by statements that God has extended his grace “*not [to] angels*” but to humans, whom the Son saves (2:5, 16). Psalm 8:4–6, which anchors this section, is explained in terms of its eschatological, anthropological, and Christological implications. Other OT passages are cited (Ps. 22:22; Isa. 8:17, 18) and alluded to (Isa. 41:8–13) in order to elaborate the Son’s bond with the “many sons” whom God brings to glory through him (Heb. 2:10).

HEBREWS 2:5–9

⁵For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. ⁶It has been testified somewhere,

- “What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?
⁷ You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,¹
⁸ putting everything in subjection under his feet.”

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. ⁹But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹ Some manuscripts insert *and set him over the works of your hands*

Section Overview: The Humbled and Glorified Son of Man

The mention of “salvation” (Heb. 1:14; 2:3) calls for elaboration. Salvation includes rescue from the Devil—from his power to inflict death and from the enslaving fear of death (2:14–15). But salvation also encompasses a destiny of glory and dominion for human beings. The eternal divine Son humbled himself to become the incarnate messianic Son in order to redeem his “brothers.” Our preacher views Psalm 8:4–6 not as a retrospective on a past paradise lost but as a preview of a paradise to come. The psalm traces the course of human history from the present (in which humans are lower than angels) to the future (in which everything will be subjected to humanity). The present does not yet show all other creatures in submission to humans, who bear the divine image (Gen. 1:26–28). Although humanity’s royal destiny is not yet visible, one man has traveled the painful route from lowliness to exalted glory. His name is Jesus, and his coronation is his reward for suffering death on behalf of others.

Section Outline

- I. The world to come will be subjected, not to angels, but to the son of man (2:5)
- II. Scripture announced God’s purpose to subject all things to the son of man (2:6–8a)
 - A. The son of man is small but is the object of God’s special care (2:6)

- B. The son of man is temporarily subordinated to angels (2:7a)
- C. But the son of man is destined for dominion (2:7b–8a)
- III. The son of man's dominion is not yet visible in our experience (2:8bc)
- IV. Nevertheless God's promise to the son of man is now fulfilled in one whom we do see, Jesus (2:9)
 - A. Jesus was temporarily subordinated to angels (2:9a)
 - B. Jesus has been crowned with glory and honor (2:9b)
 - C. His glorification is his reward for suffering death for others (2:9cd)

Comment

2:5 The conjunction “for” shows that the forthcoming exposition of Psalm 8 supports the exhortation to stay moored to the word spoken through the Son (Heb. 2:1–4). He has spoken salvation because he has come to share our humanity in order to lead us to glory. Our author has been speaking of the “world to come” since 1:6, where he introduced God's command for angels to worship the Son as having been spoken at the moment when God brought him into that realm of last-days blessedness (through resurrection and ascension). “Not to angels” implies that God subjected the world to come to someone else—but to whom? Psalm 8 gives the answer.

2:6–8a The psalm citation is introduced in vague terms: “It has been testified somewhere” reflects the Greek text's indefinite identification of the quotation's source (lit., “somewhere someone testified”). The author is signaling that this text, unlike those in chapter 1, is addressed by a human speaker to God, but the identity of the human speaker is not significant.

God put everything “in subjection” under the feet of “the son of man.” Scholarly opinion is divided over whether our author treats Psalm 8 as a straightforward messianic prophecy of the *Son's* brief humiliation and subsequent exaltation or as a forecast of *humanity's* destiny, which finds its first fulfillment in Jesus. In favor of seeing the Son as the one to whom the world to come is subject is the motif of subjects being placed “under his feet,” which links Psalm 8 with Psalm 110:1, cited in Hebrews 1:13. On the other hand, “those who are to inherit salvation” were introduced in 1:14, and the author will soon describe them as “many sons” whom God brings to glory through Christ's suffering (2:10). Further, when the formula “not [to] angels” concludes this section in 2:16, the preacher places over against angels “the offspring of Abraham,” the people of God.

A third alternative, which builds a bridge between the messianic and anthropological perspectives, is based on the observation that Psalm 8 shares vocabulary appearing in preceding and following psalms (e.g., the Lord's name, the earth, foes, enemies, heavens). These connections embed this psalm in a context that opens the biblical Psalter by identifying the blessed man with the anointed Davidic Messiah, the Lord's Son (Psalms 1–2).⁵ Psalm 2:7, we recall, was the first OT passage that our

⁵ James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Psalms*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Holman, forthcoming).

author cited to establish the Son's superiority to the angels (Heb. 1:5). In view of Psalm 8's undeniable allusion to the universal dominion entrusted to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28, it is reasonable to believe that David, the royal speaker of Psalm 8, portrayed his reign as a step toward the remedy of Adam's failed kingship in the garden. Our preacher would then be building on David's Adamic-Messianic trajectory, showing its destination in Jesus.

In this understanding, Psalm 8 is invoked first to describe *humanity's* honored place in the hierarchy and history of God's personal creatures, seen in King Adam at creation and reappearing after the fall in King David, a seed of the woman en route to the ultimate Seed, who would conquer the Foe through his own submission and suffering (Gen. 3:15). Then, after noting that humanity's dominion is not now visible, our author brings Jesus into view as the fulfillment of human destiny, interpreting the psalm as forecasting the phases of Jesus' mission as the last Adam and royal Messiah, first in submissive humility and then in glory.

Our author's citation follows the LXX except for the deletion of one line, "and you appointed him over the works of your hands," which is essentially synonymous with the next, included by Hebrews and containing the significant term "subjection" (cf. 2:5, 8). The LXX renders the Hebrew term *'elohim* ("heavenly beings" in Ps. 8:5) as "angels," a legitimate interpretation that serves our author's purpose in showing the angels' relationship to humanity and to the incarnate Son.

In what ways are humans subordinate to angels? Our author implied his answer when he referred to the angels' mediation of the law to Moses at Sinai (Heb. 2:2). That law imposed obligations and stipulated penalties for their violation and delivered an earthly system of worship, including sanctuary and sacrifices (Hebrews 8–10). Christ was "born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 4:4–5) and to replace the law's shadows (Heb. 9:11–14; 10:19–22).

2:8bc Our author's commentary first notes that Psalm 8 speaks of earthly creatures' universal subjection to humanity. Then comes the realistic observation that "at present" this human dominion is not visible. Believers' sufferings (2:14–16; 10:32–34; 11:32–38; 12:3–11) and the perishability of the heavens and earth (1:10–12; 12:25–27) display disorder, dysfunctionality, and death, which contradict God's purpose revealed in the psalm. Human sin has infected the created order with rebellion and chaos (Gen. 3:14–19; Rom. 8:18–22). Yet a spark of hope glimmers in the adverb "not yet" (*οὐδὲ*). Psalm 8 is not a mournful elegy for an idyllic world long ago deceased. Rather it offers a preview of a peaceable kingdom yet to come, perhaps foreshadowed in the "rest" from enemies that David once enjoyed (2 Sam. 7:1; cf. comment on Heb. 4:8).

2:9 The spark of hope expands to a ray with the introduction of Jesus, now—for the first time in this sermon-letter—called by the human name given him at birth (Matt. 1:21, 25). The author builds anticipation by first describing an individual using the psalm's terminology: "for a little while . . . made lower than the angels." Then the suspense is broken and he is identified by name, "Jesus." The two lines of

Psalm 8:5 (Heb. 2:7) forecast two phases of the Son's identification with us in our humanity: (1) first he was lowered for "a little while" beneath the angels (through becoming incarnate and suffering death for others); (2) then he was "crowned with glory and honor" (raised, ascended, and enthroned at God's right hand). The adverbial expression "a little" (Hb. *me'at*; LXX *brachy ti*) could indicate a small difference of degree or distance (2 Sam. 16:1) or a brief period of time (Pss. 94:17; 119:87; Luke 22:58; Acts 5:34). Our author understands the expression temporally: "for a little while."

His appeal to Psalm 8 serves two purposes:

- (1) It clarifies the relationship between the Son's *eternal divine* superiority to angels and his *mediatorial* superiority to angels. Since the Son is the changeless creator of heaven and earth and all their inhabitants, infinitely greater than angels, how could he "become" superior to angels and "inherit" a name more excellent than theirs (Heb. 1:4)? The exaltation of the Son *after* he made purification for sins (1:3) presupposes his prior condescension to become the incarnate mediatorial Son, sharing for a brief time humanity's position subordinate to the angels.
- (2) It affirms the solidarity of the Son with human beings through his incarnation and humiliation. Angels are servants not only to the Son but also to the human heirs of the salvation he came to achieve (1:6, 14), whom he calls his "brothers" (2:11–12).

The prologue mentioned the Son's priestly work of making purification for sins, but here we learn the price he paid to achieve this purifying mission: he suffered death, tasting it "for everyone." Our author will further describe the "everyone" for whom Jesus died as the "many sons" for whom he is the founder of salvation (Heb. 2:10) and as the "offspring of Abraham," whom he helps (v. 16). Jesus' death was the purpose of his incarnation: "He himself likewise partook of [flesh and blood], *that* [Gk. *hina*] through death he might destroy . . . the devil" (2:14–15). His death is also the warrant for his vindication: "crowned with glory and honor *because of* [Gk. *dia*] the suffering of death" (v. 9). His enthronement at God's right hand is his reward for faithful obedience "to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6–11).

Response

When we step back from everyday activities, diversions, and relationships to consider our place in the grand scheme of things, we are humbled by our insignificance. The psalmist's contemplation of the vastness of the universe rightly evoked the question, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Ps. 8:4; cf. Heb. 2:6). Beyond that universe is a Creator who transcends it in majestic infinity. As we reflect on the OT texts cited in Hebrews 1 to show the Son's supremacy, it seems unlikely that we tiny ephemeral creatures might *matter* to him. When we factor in the sobering truth that human sin disrupted the dominion once entrusted to our race by the Creator whom we spurned, our condition seems even more dire and

despicable. But Psalm 8 lifts our shame-bowed heads. Although the world we see resists us, the Creator has come to us, becoming one of us in humble subjection and emerging from suffering crowned with royal glory and honor. We should marvel and praise the God of grace, who sent his Son to die, bringing us to glory as heirs of “the world to come.”

HEBREWS 2:10–18

¹⁰For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. ¹¹For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source.¹ That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers,² ¹²saying,

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”

¹³And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again,

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

¹⁴Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ¹⁶For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

¹Greek *all are of one* ²Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters*; also verse 12

Section Overview: The Champion of Salvation for His Brothers and Sisters

The opening conjunction “For” shows that this section argues for the appropriateness (“fitting”) of the truth announced in Hebrews 2:9, that God’s grace mandated that Jesus suffer death on behalf of others. He could suffer as their substitute because of the family tie that unites him, the unique Son, to them, the “many sons”

whom God is leading to glory (v. 10). He and they share one father (v. 11), so without embarrassment he identifies them as his brothers (vv. 11–12, 17) and God’s children (vv. 13–14). It is not angels whom the Son holds and helps but human beings who are Abraham’s offspring (v. 16). The plight of his siblings—their enslavement through the fear of death—required that their divine kinsman-redeemer become fully human, like them in every respect, sharing in their flesh and blood. In his incarnation the divine Son became briefly lower than angels because nothing less than his death (vv. 9–10, 14) could set the Devil’s guilty captives free and deflect God’s just wrath from them (vv. 17–18). Here Hebrews presents Christ’s death both as royal combat and as rescue (“destroy . . . the devil, and deliver all those . . . subject to lifelong slavery”; vv. 14–15) and as priestly atonement (“a merciful and faithful high priest . . . to make propitiation for the sins”; v. 17).

Section Outline

- I. The Creator qualified his unique Son through suffering to be rescuer and priest to many sons, leading them to glory (2:10)
- II. The Son and the sons are united by a common father and common faith (2:11–13)
- III. The Son and the children share a common humanity, subject to harm and death (2:14–18)
 - A. The Son embraced human nature completely, becoming vulnerable to death, so that by his death he might free those enslaved by the Devil’s death-inflicting power (2:14–15)
 - B. The slaves whom the Son grasps to help are not angels, but Abraham’s offspring (2:16)
 - C. The Son embraced human nature completely, enduring suffering and temptation, in order to become a merciful, faithful High Priest, atoning for our sins and aiding us in our trials (2:17–18)

Comment

2:10 Ancient pagans and Jews found Jesus’ suffering on the cross both foolish and offensive, not at all a “fitting” way for the creator and sustainer of “all things” to remedy the plight of humanity (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–25). But it is the plight of the “many sons” whom God purposes to lead to glory that makes Christ’s cross the only fitting and necessary (“had to be”; Heb. 2:17) means of rescue, since their slavery to the fear of death (and the Devil) could be broken only by the propitiating death of their brother, the divine and messianic Son, on their behalf.

The “many sons” whom God leads to glory define more specifically the “everyone” of verse 9. “Glory” encompasses inheriting salvation (1:14) and dominion in “the world to come,” as described in Psalm 8 (cf. Heb. 2:5–8). All those for whom Christ “[tasted] death” (v. 9) are the sons and heirs whom God will lead to glory. They are “the offspring of Abraham” (v. 16) whom the Son laid hold of and helps, for they follow in the footsteps of Abraham’s patient faith (6:12–15; cf. Rom.

4:9–12). The Greek term *archēgos*, translated “founder,” appears thirty-five times in the LXX, typically with reference to leaders of families and clans. In extrabiblical Greek it designates founders of cities and champions who fight on behalf of a nation. It is applied to Jesus also in Hebrews 12:2 (of faith) and in Acts 3:15 (of life) and Acts 5:31 (with “Savior”). In light of the way Hebrews 2:14–15 will portray Christ as the children’s representative combatant (kinsman-redeemer), “champion” is another good English equivalent.⁶

God has made the Savior “perfect through suffering.” Perfection is a prominent theme in Hebrews (5:9; 7:11, 19, 28; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23); the perfecting of Christ himself is mentioned again in 5:9 and 7:28. Jesus was and is undefiled by sin (4:15; 7:26), so with respect to Jesus the concept of progress or moral growth from sinfulness to holiness is unthinkable. Rather, when Hebrews speaks of Jesus’ being “made perfect,” it is employing the LXX sense of consecration and ordination to priestly office (Ex. 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev. 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num. 3:3; etc.). As Hebrews 2:17–18 and 5:8–10 show, Jesus underwent this induction to his priesthood not through external rituals of washing and anointing but through his lifelong obedience to the will of God amid trial and suffering, climaxing in his death.

2:11 In Hebrews, to “sanctify” bears priestly overtones of “cleansing” people so that they may enter God’s holy presence in worship (9:13–14; 10:14; 13:12). Just as Aaronic priests had family solidarity with their Israelite kinfolk (5:1; 7:5), so Christ shares a family tie with his brothers and sisters. Behind the phrase “all have one source” is the ambiguous Greek “all from one.” This probably refers to their sharing one father. But who is this father? He is not Adam (obliquely alluded to in 2:6–8) nor Abraham (2:16). Rather, he is God the Father, for the sanctifier is God’s Son, and those whom he sanctifies are God’s many sons. Their prior union in the electing purpose of God is the reason for the Son’s incarnation on behalf of his brothers’ redemption (2:14, 17).

2:12 We might expect that the brothers’ vulnerability to fear of death, arising from sinful guilt, would make the glorious divine Son ashamed to identify them as his siblings, but the opposite is true, as Psalm 22:22 shows. Later we will learn that God is not ashamed to be called the God of ancient people of faith (Heb. 11:16). In response, we must readily bear the reproach of Christ (11:25–26; 13:13) and identify, without shame, with those who suffer for Jesus’ sake (13:3; cf. 10:32–34; 2 Tim. 1:8, 12, 16). Here our preacher calls us to marvel that, in the words of Psalm 22, the gloriously divine and messianic Son identifies himself without embarrassment with his sinful, struggling siblings.

Psalm 22 traces a trajectory of suffering (Ps. 22:1–21), beginning with the forsakenness by God echoed in Jesus’ outcry from the cross (Matt. 27:46), to salvation and celebration (Ps. 22:22–31). This is the two-phase path our preacher traced in his Psalm 8 citation: first lower than angels, then crowned with glory. So he cites

⁶ Lane, *Hebrews* 1–8, 56–57.

Psalm 22:22, the psalm's turning point from suffering to glory, not only because it mentions "my brothers" but also because *as a whole* this psalm projects the pattern of the Christ's redemptive mission (Luke 24:25–27; 1 Pet. 1:11).

2:13 Isaiah 8:17–18 provides further support for the family ties linking the Son with those he sanctifies. Christ himself speaks through the prophet's confession of trust in God in the midst of his children. (The wording of 2 Sam. 22:3 and Isa. 12:2 parallels Isa. 8:17.) Jesus' faith is not identical to ours; he is the Righteous One whose obedience justifies the ungodly (Isa. 53:11; Rom. 3:21–26; 4:5), so he is the *object* of our faith (Phil. 3:9), the unique mediator through whom we approach God (Heb. 7:25; 10:19–22). Yet Jesus himself trusted the Father's promise to reward his impeccable obedience and sacrificial death, and he is therefore the champion (*archēgos*) of our faith (12:2).

2:14 Two factors mandated the Son's incarnation. First, he shared one Father with his brothers, who needed salvation (Heb. 2:10–13). Second, his brothers are human beings with "flesh and blood" bodies, vulnerable to corruption, liable to judgment, and threatened by death (cf. Eph. 6:12; 1 Cor. 15:50). His humble condescension to partake of their same flesh and blood, to embrace full (though unfallen) human nature, made it possible for him to die on their behalf (Heb. 2:9) and, in so doing, to disarm the Devil of his power to inflict death. The Greek term *katargeō*, rendered "destroy," can mean eradication (1 Cor. 15:26; 2 Thess. 2:8) but typically refers to nullifying, neutralizing, or depriving of power (e.g., Rom. 3:3, 31; 4:14; Gal. 5:4, 11), which is the immediate effect of Christ's death on the Devil. The Devil wielded death-inflicting power first by luring humans to defy God's prohibition (Gen. 3:4) and then by accusing them before God's just tribunal (Zech. 3:1; John 8:44; Rev. 12:9–11). But the death of Jesus the innocent in the place of his guilty brothers has deprived the Devil of the capital charges he had lodged against them (cf. Col. 2:14–15).

2:15–16 The Devil's defeat through Jesus' death delivers those enslaved by the fear of death, while the propitiation of God's wrath against their sins (v. 17) removes the verdict of condemnation and the prospect of sin's sentence: eternal death. The author conveys the Son's battling and defeating the Devil through his own substitutionary death with wording echoing Isaiah's portrait of the Lord as his people's kinsman-redeemer. He has come to free captives from the tyrant (Isa. 49:24–26). He "helps"—that is, "takes hold of" (*epilambanomai*; LXX Isa. 41:9, 10, 13; Jer. 31:32, cited in Heb. 8:9)—"the offspring of Abraham" and calms their "fear" through his "help" (*boētheō*). (These terms all appear both in Isa. 41:8–13 LXX and in Heb. 2:16–18). Those whom the Son has redeemed are coming into clearer focus: the "everyone" of Hebrews 2:9 are the "many sons" of verse 10, who are the "offspring of Abraham," imitating Abraham's faith (6:12–13; 11:11, 18; cf. Rom. 4:12).

2:17 Having portrayed the Son's redemptive death in military (that is, royal) terms as the defeat of the Devil and the emancipation of his slaves, our author now views the Son's sacrifice from a priestly perspective, introducing Jesus' office as

High Priest, a title that hereafter will be applied repeatedly to Christ (3:1; 4:14, 15; 5:1, 5, 10; 6:20; 7:26, 27, 28; 8:1, 3; 9:7, 11, 25; 13:11). This is the main “point” of the sermon that is the book of Hebrews (8:1). Priestly intercession demands identification with those on whose behalf the priest intervenes with God, for their shared nature qualifies the priest to act as their representative, while their shared experience of suffering enriches his sympathy for them in their trials (4:14–5:4).

Jesus’ priestly attributes, his being “merciful and faithful,” reflect the Lord’s declaration of his name to Moses on Mount Sinai as “merciful and gracious, . . . abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6; cf. Ps. 40:11). These qualities make Jesus the perfect mediator between weak and sinful humans who need merciful help (Heb. 4:15) and the holy God who demands faithfulness in those who approach him. In the days of Samuel, the priest Eli failed to protect God’s sanctuary from defilement by Eli’s own corrupt sons, so God declared that he would remove Eli’s house from the priesthood, replacing it with a “faithful priest” (1 Sam. 2:35). Jesus is that faithful priest, whose ministry replaces not only Eli but the entire Levitical-Aaronic order (Hebrews 7). In the next paragraph (3:1–6), faithfulness will be the point of comparison between Moses the servant and Jesus the Son (cf. Num. 12:7).

Scholars debate whether the term translated as “propitiation” (*hilaskomai*) expresses only the removal of sin’s guilt (expiation) or also includes the deflection of God’s wrath from the guilty (propitiation). Key OT and NT texts mention divine wrath in contexts implying its removal, along with that of sin’s defilement, through sacrifice (e.g., Ps. 78:21, 38; Rom. 1:18; 2:5; 3:23–26). Here, both effects of Christ’s sacrifice are in view: guilt is removed and God’s just wrath is placated.

2:18 Having undergone death for others, our High Priest was subsequently raised to “indestructible life” (7:16; cf. 13:20). He “always lives” to “save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him,” interceding for them (7:25) and providing timely, empathetic, and strong help to his suffering people in their trials.

Response

The incomparable majesty of the Son, announced in the prologue of Hebrews and substantiated in the OT texts that followed, rightly moves us to awe and worship. But his deity also seems to place a vast distance between him and us, stained as we are with sin and struggling in a curse-infected world. But now we marvel at the lengths to which the Creator “for whom and by whom all things exist” (2:10) went in order to save us from sin and the death that is its bitter outcome, leading us to glory instead. The champion of our salvation, Jesus, embraced us as his God-given family and assumed our destructible flesh and blood as his own. Then by his death he put death to death, depriving the Devil of the terror-inducing weapon of his tyranny and setting us captives free.

Since this mighty champion not only called us his brothers and sisters but also gave his life on our behalf, we have the strongest of rationales to fix our attention

and rest our hope on “Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1). Having died for us, Jesus now lives forever for us, interceding as our Great High Priest. We, in turn, may and must draw near to his Father’s throne of grace in prayer and worship, confidently expecting his welcome and his generous provision of the aid we need at the moment we need it (4:14–16).

OVERVIEW OF

HEBREWS 3:1–4:13

Although the motif of Jesus’ priestly ministry has now been introduced (Heb. 2:17–18), its elaboration will be deferred to the heart of the sermon (4:14–10:31). In the meantime, the implications of the Son’s ministry of revelation will be explored. Moving from the contrast between the angels and the Son (1:4–2:18), we now come to Moses, Israel’s preeminent prophet and covenant mediator, and his relationship to Christ. Through Moses the servant and Christ the Son, God’s people have heard his voice, as will be shown from Psalm 95’s retrospective on Israel’s wilderness experience under Moses. The generation that escaped Egypt through Moses’ leadership heard but did not believe God’s voice, so they died in the desert wasteland, banned from entering the Promised Land. Their history warns those now addressed by God’s last-days speech in the Son, lest they too come short of the inheritance God promises to those who persevere in faith.

HEBREWS 3:1–6

3 Therefore, holy brothers,¹ you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, ²who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s² house. ³For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses—as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. ⁴(For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.) ⁵Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, ⁶but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.³

¹Or *brothers and sisters*; also verse 12 ²Greek *his*; also verses 5, 6 ³Some manuscripts insert *firm to the end*

Section Overview: Jesus the Faithful Son, Greater Than Moses the Faithful Servant

The description of Christ as a “*faithful* high priest” (Heb. 2:17) provides the bridge—via God’s commendation of Moses as his “*faithful*” servant (Num. 12:7; Heb. 3:2, 5)—to a comparison of and contrast between Moses and Jesus. Both Moses and Jesus were faithful to their callings from God, although the honor of their respective roles (servant vs. Son) differed. The themes of revelation and redemptive-historical progress continue from the prologue (1:1–2), for Moses testified to things “to be spoken later” (3:5). The discussion of the superiority of the Son to Moses the servant transitions into an exposition of Psalm 95, which describes the wilderness generation’s refusal to heed God’s voice through Moses and their consequent failure to enter God’s rest (Heb. 3:7–4:11).

Section Outline

- I. Focus attention on your “apostle and high priest,” Jesus, faithful like Moses for the sake of God’s house (3:1–2)
- II. Jesus deserves more glory than Moses (3:3–6a)
 - A. As the builder of God’s house is more glorious than the house (3:3–4)
 - B. As a Son over the house has more honor than a servant in the house (3:5–6a)
- III. We are the house that Jesus builds and rules, if we hold to the hope he secures (3:6b)

Comment

3:1 “Therefore” signals that the obligation to “consider Jesus” follows from the good news that he is a “merciful and faithful high priest” who can help those undergoing temptation (2:17–18). Having affirmed that believers are “brothers” of the Son who sanctifies them (2:10–13), our preacher addresses them as “holy brothers.” Christians are addressed as “brothers” often in NT epistles, including later in this sermon-letter (3:12; 10:19; 13:22), but only here, soon after reference to the *sanctification* of God’s sons (2:11) through propitiation of their sins (2:17), does the combination “holy brothers” occur. They “share in a heavenly calling” as the heirs of salvation (1:14), destined for dominion in the world to come (2:5–8) and anticipating a heavenly homeland (11:14–16). Their worship on earth already participates in the celebration in the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22–24). They “share” in this glorious calling because the Son came to “share” their fragile flesh and blood (2:14), and thus they are “companions” of the Anointed One (1:8–9; cf. 3:14). The verb “share” (*metechō*) and the noun “companions” (*metochoi*) are Greek cognates.

To “consider” (*katanoeō*) Jesus is to focus one’s vision and attention on him, since the verb not only refers to mental reflection (Heb. 10:24) but also can have visual overtones (Matt. 7:3; Luke 12:24, 27; Acts 7:31–32; 11:6; 27:39; James 1:23–24). This exhortation reappears in other words in Hebrews 12:2, where believers are to be “looking [*aphorāō*] to Jesus.” The point of fixing one’s mind’s eye (as it were)

on Jesus is not merely to imitate his faithfulness but also to rest one's trust in his ministry as "the apostle and high priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1). Perseverance in the Christian pilgrimage results from holding fast in confidence to the hope secured for us by Christ. Jesus spoke frequently of the Father's "sending" (both *apostellō* and *pempō*) him on his mission of revelation and redemption (John 3:17, 34; 8:42; etc.), but only here in the NT is Jesus called an "apostle." This term probably highlights his revelatory role, which excels and supersedes that of the OT prophets (Heb. 1:1–2), including Moses.

3:2 God "appointed" Jesus as "apostle and high priest," just as he appointed Moses to his mediatorial role for Israel and appointed Aaron to his high priesthood (5:4–6). The privilege of intervening between God and mankind is assigned by God, not seized by the human servant. Both Jesus and Moses proved faithful to their respective assignments for "all God's house," that is, God's people. In Numbers 12:6–8 the Lord defended Moses against critiques from his siblings, Miriam and Aaron, who also were prophets. In that passage, listing some of the "many ways" that he spoke through other prophets (cf. Heb. 1:1), the Lord distinguished "my servant Moses," who "is faithful in all my house," as the unique prophet with whom he spoke "mouth to mouth."

3:3–4 Although Jesus and Moses alike were faithful, they differed in their worthiness to receive glory. God is the implied agent of the passive verb "has been counted worthy," for he is the one who "crowned" Jesus "with glory and honor" (2:9). The Lord honored Moses above other prophets, but he has honored the Son above Moses, the greatest of the OT prophets, as our preacher is about to show explicitly (3:5–6).

Our author exploits the fact that both Hebrew (*bayit*) and Greek (*oikos*) use "house" to refer both to a habitable structure (e.g., Gen. 12:15) and to the people who inhabit it (Gen. 12:17), even across generations (Gen. 50:22). The superior glory of Jesus to that of Moses is supported by the analogy that a house's builder deserves greater glory than the house he built, since (it is implied) the house owes its existence to its builder's effort. What is true of human builders is all the more true of the Creator, who is the "builder of all things" (cf. Isa. 40:28; 45:7). The Son's role in creation invites readers to perceive the divine glory of Jesus, through whom God "created the world" (Heb. 1:2) and who in the beginning laid earth's foundation and fashioned the heavens (1:10). Moreover, the Son is here honored as the "builder" of the covenant people of God, both the source of their existence and identity as a community and also the sovereign over them.

3:5–6a The language describing Moses in Numbers 12:7 as the Lord's "servant" "*in* all God's house" signals his inferiority to Christ, who "is faithful *over* God's house as a son." Both the titles ("servant" vs. "son") and the prepositions ("in" vs. "over") show the superiority of Christ. The Greek term rendered "servant" (*therapōn*; from Num. 12:7 LXX) appears only here in the NT, but the point is the same as that

made earlier with respect to angels, who are “ministers” (*leitourgous*; Heb. 1:7, 14), in contrast to the Son, who is the enthroned “God” and “Lord” (1:8, 10).

Moses’ mission as servant was to “testify to things that were to be spoken later.” Moses had many roles, priestly and royal as well as prophetic, but here the author focuses attention on his prophetic role as one through whom “long ago . . . God spoke” (1:1). The contrast between the earlier prophetic era of revelation and the “last days” era of revelation in the Son (1:1–2) reappears here: Moses’ testimony was forward-looking, attesting in advance to what God would speak later in history, the message of salvation to be “declared . . . by the Lord” Jesus and then by those who heard him (2:3). Jesus affirmed that Moses wrote about his sufferings and subsequent glories (John 5:44–47; Luke 24:25–27, 44–49). Hebrews will teach that regulations pertaining to the tabernacle and its sacrifices, received by Moses in the law, foreshadowed a new and better covenant and worship in a “time of reformation” (Heb. 9:6–10; 10:1), which has now come “at the end of the ages” through Christ (9:11–15, 26).

3:6b Christ’s superiority to Moses leads to a conclusion that is both comforting and challenging. It is comforting to learn that now “we are his [Christ’s] house” in the sense of being his family, the brothers and sisters for whose liberation he assumed our human nature. His dominion secures the safety of those in his house. The challenge arises from the contingency: “if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.” As the following analysis of Israel’s wilderness experience through the lens of Psalm 95 will show, people can belong to a community that experiences God’s acts of power and mercy and yet fail to respond in persevering faith (Heb. 3:7–4:11). The author will later repeat the summons to hold fast our confidence (3:14) and our confession (10:23). Here he stresses that this enduring commitment is not mere dogged, teeth-gritted survival but rather a persistence that radiates bold assurance and hope (cf. 10:19). It is only by focusing attention on Jesus, our faithful apostle and high priest, that we can sustain such lifelong and hopeful tenacity throughout life’s journey.

Response

As our revealer of the Father (in his role as apostle) and our reconciler to the Father (in his role as High Priest), Jesus transcends Moses, Israel’s covenant mediator and greatest prophet. The response that Christ’s superiority should elicit from us is defined at the opening and close of this paragraph (3:1, 6b). On the one hand, Christ’s faithfulness in his revelatory and redemptive offices demands that we give him our unwavering and undivided attention, listening eagerly to his voice as he addresses us from heaven through his ministers (cf. 12:25–26; 13:7). On the other hand, this single-minded attention to our faithful Savior must produce in us endurance in our allegiance to him and unashamed confidence in the inheritance he promises.

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 3:7–4:13

The author concluded his comparison and contrast between Moses and Christ (3:1–6) by indicating that his hearers' standing as Christ's "house" is contingent on their perseverance in their confidence in Jesus, their apostle and high priest. This motif of persevering faith in response to God's self-revelation is now developed in an exposition and application of Psalm 95:7–11. This portion of Psalm 95 is cited in full in Hebrews 3:7–11 and in part in 3:15; 4:3, 5, 7. Further allusions to Psalm 95 are interspersed throughout the interpretive comments that follow (e.g., "today" in Heb. 3:13; 4:7; "rest" in 3:18; 4:4, 6, 8–11). The psalm draws a sobering warning from the example of Israel's wilderness generation, who experienced liberation from Egyptian slavery through Moses (3:16) but disbelieved God's promise and so died without entering his "rest," the land promised to the patriarchs. The psalm is attributed to David, "so long" after Israel's wilderness generation had died in the desert and after Joshua had led their children into the Promised Land (4:7–8). David's generation, living in the land in their "today," still needed to heed the summons to respond to God's voice in faith and obedience in order to enter God's "rest" (which, it is implied, transcends peaceful life in Canaan). So also do the Hebrew Christians who first received this sermon-letter, whose "today" of wilderness testing, pilgrimage toward God's rest, and obligation to heed God's voice extends until Christ's return (9:28).

HEBREWS 3:7–19

⁷Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,

"Today, if you hear his voice,

⁸ do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,

⁹ where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.

¹⁰ Therefore I was provoked with that generation,
and said, 'They always go astray in their heart;
they have not known my ways.'

¹¹ As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest.’”

¹²Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. ¹³But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. ¹⁵As it is said,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

¹⁶For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was he provoked for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹So we see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief.

Section Overview: Exhortation: Hear His Voice with Faith

Our preacher quotes Psalm 95:7–11 as a divine directive and warning that the Holy Spirit is now speaking to his Hebrew-Christian congregation (Heb. 3:7–11). The directive is to respond to God’s voice not with hardened hearts but with faith, which produces obedience. The warning arises from the dire example of the Israelite generation whom Moses led to freedom in the exodus but who fell short of the Promised Land through their unbelief in God’s provision and power. The psalm’s directive and warning are applied to the Hebrew Christian congregation, which bears corporate responsibility to guard its members from apostasy (3:12–15). Daily mutual exhortation is needed to counteract sin’s deceitfulness. Our privilege as Christ’s companions must motivate us to keep a firm grip on the reality in which we have placed our confidence. The warning from the wilderness generation’s experience is deepened through rhetorical questions that imply that merely belonging to a community favored with God’s gifts—delivered from Egypt, hearing God’s voice—does not secure eternal salvation (3:16–19). Rebellion, sin, disobedience, and unbelief are complementary descriptions of the hardened hearts that excluded Moses’ generation from God’s rest.

Section Outline

- I. Warning against unbelief: when you hear God’s voice, heed his words, lest you fall short of his rest (3:7–11)
 - A. Do not harden your hearts at the sound of God’s voice (3:7–8a)
 - B. In the wilderness, your fathers rebelled and tried God, despite his works (3:8b–10)
 - C. So God excluded those rebels from his rest (3:11)

- II. Call to persevere in confident faith through mutual encouragement (3:12–15)
 - A. Beware lest any of you turn from God through unbelief (3:12)
 - B. Encourage each other daily, to prevent anyone from succumbing to sin's lie (3:13)
 - C. We are Christ's companions, if we maintain our confidence as God speaks to us "today" (3:14–15)
- III. Warning against unbelief: those who rebelled in disobedience and unbelief fell dead in the wilderness (3:16–19)
 - A. The Israelites of Moses' day had experienced God's rescue from Egypt (3:16)
 - B. They provoked their Lord through sinful disobedience (3:17)
 - C. They fell dead, short of God's promised rest, through unbelief (3:18–19)

Comment

3:7 "Therefore" indicates that the negative example of Israel's wilderness generation supports the obligation of those in God's "house" to hold fast to their confidence in Christ (3:6). Our author introduces his citation of Psalm 95:7d–11 with the formula "as the Holy Spirit says." Other NT authors typically preface OT quotations with "it is written" (e.g., Matt. 2:5; Mark 1:2; Luke 2:23; Rom. 1:17; 1 Cor. 1:31) in order to highlight Scripture's fixed and lasting authority. Hebrews, meanwhile, often introduces OT texts with verbs of *speaking* in the *present* tense in order to emphasize God's immediate address to the congregation (cf. Heb. 3:15; 5:6; 8:8, 13; 9:8; 10:5, 15). Lessons drawn from Israel's ancient history by an ancient psalmist are not relics of a distant past but are the living, present voice of God (4:12), addressing us "today" (12:25–27).

Psalm 95 opens (Ps. 95:1–7c) as a call to worship the Lord who is the source of salvation, the great God, the creator of everything, the shepherd of his people—descriptions that Hebrews applies to Jesus the Son (Heb. 2:10; 1:8, 10; 13:20). Then the psalm shifts suddenly from praise to a sobering warning against hardness of heart, drawn from the travesty of Israelite unbelief in the wilderness after the exodus (Ps. 95:7d–11).

3:8–9 Psalm 95 draws together two incidents from Israel's post-Red Sea travels in the wilderness in order to illustrate that generation's hard hearts, expressed in open rebellion. The Hebrew text of Psalm 95 contains the meaningful place-names Meribah (strife) and Massah (testing), assigned to a wilderness locale where thirsty Israelites put the Lord to the test, demanding proof of his presence among them (Ex. 17:1–7). The LXX, followed by our author, renders these place-names in Greek terms meaning "rebellion" and "testing," which form a bridge to a later incident at Kadesh (Num. 14:1–38). There the Israelites balked at entering the Promised Land, following the fearful, faithless report of ten spies instead of Joshua and Caleb's

summons not to “rebel” but to trust the Lord (Num. 14:9). Testing the Lord and rebelling against him characterized the wilderness generation (Ps. 78:8, 17, 40, 56).

The psalmist traced Israel’s problem to hearts that were “hardened” (Heb. 3:8) and prone to “always go astray” from the Lord (v. 10). Hebrews likewise warns against “an evil, unbelieving heart,” “hardened” by sin’s deceitfulness (vv. 12–13). Sin does not advertise its lethal consequences, as Eve sadly discovered (Gen. 3:13; 2 Cor. 11:3). The ten spies’ misgivings about the daunting residents of Canaan sounded plausible (Num. 13:27–29, 31–33), so the Israelites trusted in their “bad report” and refused to believe the Lord, openly rebelling against his summons to advance in faith (Num. 14:9, 11).

“Testing” in the wilderness operated in two directions. At Massah the Israelites wrongly put the Lord to the test, doubting his presence and provision (Ex. 17:7; Deut. 6:16; Matt. 4:7). On the other hand, throughout their wilderness ordeal the Lord was putting his people to the test (Ex. 16:4; 20:20) in order “to know what was in your heart” (Deut. 8:2). Jesus himself underwent testing in his sufferings and is able to help others undergoing such tests (Heb. 2:18; 4:15).

3:10–11 The Israelites’ forty-year trek through the wilderness gave them ample opportunity to see God’s works—the ten plagues on Egypt; the crossing of the Red Sea; provision of water from the rock, manna, and quail; healing from venomous snakebites; and more. But those forty years were marred by the people’s obstinate, unbelieving response to God’s miraculous care, provoking his righteous wrath (Heb. 3:17). The oath that the Lord swore in his anger, “They shall not enter my rest,” is expressed grammatically as a conditional clause in Hebrew and Greek, “If they shall enter my rest,” with the consequence implied: “may I myself be accursed and destroyed.” In other words, the force of oaths sworn by “the living God” (3:12) is to put his own life on the line: if those rebels gained access to his land, the Lord would himself willingly undergo a violent death.

The source of the psalm’s oath language is Numbers 14:28–30: “As I live, declares the LORD, . . . your dead bodies shall fall in this wilderness, and of all your number, . . . from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against me, not one shall come into the land where I swore that I would make you dwell, except Caleb . . . and Joshua.” Mercifully, Hebrews will also explore God’s oath to bless those who believe his promises as Abraham did (Heb. 6:13–18; cf. Gen. 15:7–21; 22:16), and God’s sworn oath to bless believers is grounded, in turn, on the oath by which he appointed his Son as the final and eternal High Priest (Heb. 7:20–21; cf. Ps. 110:4).

Against the background of Israel’s rebellion at Kadesh, God’s “rest” would be understood as the Promised Land of Canaan, which the next Israelite generation would enter. Yet our preacher will argue from Genesis and from the historical context of Psalm 95 in David’s time that “God’s rest” must transcend Canaan (Heb. 4:6–11). That land was merely an earthly sign pointing to a better, heavenly country, the object of the patriarchs’ hopes (11:13–16).

3:12 From the sober warning of Psalm 95 our preacher now derives both a negative caution and a positive exhortation for his Jewish-Christian congregation. The combination of “take care” or “see” with “unbelief” in both verse 12 and verse 19 envelopes the exhortation as an *inclusio*, even though verses 16–19 redirect attention from the current audience back to the wilderness generation. The cause of the wilderness generation’s failure to enter God’s rest is variously described as having hardened hearts, rebelling, putting God to the test, provoking his anger, going astray, not knowing God’s ways, being hardened by sin’s deceitfulness, and disobeying. But at the root is an “evil, *unbelieving* heart”—a deep distrust of God and his promises.

The author addresses the congregation as “brothers,” reinforcing the family tie binding them to Jesus the Son and to each other. Thus he also assures them of his concern for their spiritual well-being (2:11–12; 3:1). He will reassure his hearers as a group that he is confident that “things that belong to salvation” characterize them (6:9–10), but his concern extends to the individual who may be tempted to “fall away” from the living God in unbelief (cf. 12:12–17). The Greek verb rendered “fall away” is *aphistēmi*, referring to a more deliberate departure than the verb rendered “drift away” (2:1). To fall away is nothing less than apostasy akin to the Israelites’ defiant rebellion in the wilderness.

3:13 The Christian community can help to safeguard its wavering members by pursuing daily mutual exhortation and encouragement. The psalm’s “today” extends from David’s day (4:7) to the present, and thus the testing of faith’s perseverance in a hostile setting continues, as does believers’ responsibility to speak words of faith to each other. This is one purpose of the church’s assembling for worship (10:23–25). Encouraging conversation is akin to physically resetting and supporting a dislocated limb or joint (12:12–13). This entire sermon-letter of Hebrews is a “word of exhortation” (13:22).

3:14 “We have come to share in Christ” could literally be rendered, “We have become Christ’s partners [*metochoi*].” The citation of Psalm 45 in Hebrews 1:8–9 spoke of the Son’s anointing and then of his “companions” (*metochoi*), and in 2:14 the related verb *metechō* spoke of the Son’s “partaking” of the human flesh and blood his children share. We and Christ have one father (2:11) and belong to one family, and so through Christ’s incarnation, obedience, sacrifice, and resurrection we share the blessedness and benefits that are rightfully his. Such privilege must not tempt us to complacency, however, for the only faith that unites to Christ’s grace is a faith that endures. Just as the hearers’ identity as the Son’s “house” is conditioned on holding fast to their confident hope (3:6), so their status as his coheirs and partners depends on keeping to the end their grip on the substantial reality⁷ they had grasped at the beginning of their Christian pilgrimage.

⁷ The term rendered “original confidence” (*hypostasis*) designates not mere subjective “sureness” but the objective, substantial ground of that assurance, as in the first appearance of *hypostasis* in Hebrews 1:3: “the exact imprint of his *nature*” (1:3).

3:15 “As it is said” closely connects the “today” of the psalm citation to the preceding exhortations (“take care . . . exhort . . . hold . . . firm”) and should be understood as “while it is being said.” In other words, we are hearing God’s voice *in the present*, so our obligation to heed his voice is valid *now*.

3:16–18 Our preacher engages his hearers’ thought using a series of questions probing the spiritual identity of the wilderness generation. The questions are grouped in three couplets. In the first two couplets, the first question echoes wording in Psalm 95 while the second, rhetorical question draws terminology from the account of Kadesh in Numbers 14, in which the Israelites refused to enter the Promised Land. The third couplet combines features of Psalm 95 and Numbers 14 in a single rhetorical question (terms drawn from the OT passages are italicized):

- (A) Who, having *heard, rebelled?* (Ps. 95:7d–8a = Heb. 3:7b–8a)
- (A') Was it not all those who *left Egypt* through *Moses?* (Num. 14:13, 19, 22)

- (B) With whom was he *provoked forty years?* (Ps. 95:10a = Heb. 3:9b–10a)
- (B') Was it not those who *sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?* (Num. 14:29, 32, 40)

- (C) To whom did he *swear* that they *would not enter his rest* (Ps. 95:11 = Heb. 3:11),
- (C') except to those who *disobeyed?* (Num. 14:21–23, 28–30, 43; cf. Josh. 5:6)

These two OT texts, one narrating the rebellion in Moses’ day (Numbers 14) and the other drawing admonition from that incident for later generations (Psalm 95), are interwoven to reinforce the sobering caution that we must take away from that event.

Mention of the exodus from slavery in Egypt emphasizes two truths. First, the Israelites’ unbelieving rebellion against the Lord was utterly without warrant, since they had already experienced his mighty rescue. Second, many who received that initial liberation, who “saw my works for forty years” (Heb. 3:9) and heard his voice, did not respond in faith and so failed to inherit the homeland God had promised to the patriarchs. In 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 Paul draws the same lesson from the wilderness generation’s privileges (“baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” nourished with spiritual food and drink), their rebellion (idolatry, immorality, complaint), and their resultant destruction.

3:19 The root of Israel’s rebellion was “unbelief,” a refusal to trust that God would keep his word. The Lord said as much at Kadesh: “How long will this people despise me? And how long will they *not believe in me*, in spite of all the signs that I have done among them?” (Num. 14:11; cf. Deut. 9:23). Their refusal to embrace God’s promise provoked his wrath and his solemn oath that they would not experience his rest, but our preacher will now encourage his new covenant listeners to

enter a far greater rest than Canaan could ever have provided—through trusting the voice of the God who still speaks “today.”

Response

The life of Christian believers parallels the time of Israel’s wilderness generation. On the one hand, those Israelites had experienced God’s mighty deliverance, leaving Egypt and its enslavement through Moses. On the other hand, however, they refused to believe that their divine protector could dispossess Canaan’s pagan powers and give them the land he had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Like that ancient people of God, we who have become Christ’s companions, children of God being led to glory, have experienced rescue and liberation. But we are not “home” yet.

Life in this world’s wilderness offers many opportunities to see the Lord’s works and come to know his ways. But it also tests our trust in him: will we “see through” sin’s deceitfulness and listen eagerly to the living God’s living word (4:12)? Or will we give credence to voices of doubt and discouragement, allowing a “root of bitterness” to spring up in the midst of our congregations, causing trouble and defiling many (12:15)?

We have seen God perform greater works than those witnessed by ancient Israel. We have witnessed in the gospel the final sacrifice of Jesus the Son, which cleanses stained consciences “once for all” (9:14; 10:10); his resurrection from the dead (13:20); and his ascent to God’s right hand as our ever-living, always interceding High Priest (6:19–20; 7:24–25; 8:1–2). The ground of our confidence is so substantive, so solid, that we have every reason to grip it firmly by faith to the end of our pilgrimage.

HEBREWS 4:1–13

4 Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it. ²For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened.¹ ³For we who have believed enter that rest, as he has said,

“As I swore in my wrath,
‘They shall not enter my rest,’”

although his works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴For he has somewhere spoken of the seventh day in this way: “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.” ⁵And again in this passage he said,

“They shall not enter my rest.”

⁶Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷again he appoints a certain day, “Today,” saying through David so long afterward, in the words already quoted,

“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”

⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, God² would not have spoken of another day later on. ⁹So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, ¹⁰for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his.

¹¹Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. ¹²For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

¹Some manuscripts *it did not meet with faith in the hearers* ²Greek *he*

Section Overview: Entering God’s Rest

The exposition and application of Psalm 95’s commentary on Israel’s wilderness generation, begun in Hebrews 3:7, continues and concludes in this section. The preacher now focuses on God’s “rest,” the destination of blessedness that the Promised Land represented for those who left Egypt with Moses. God’s oath, which excluded unbelieving rebels, implied his promise that others coming later, whose hearts were not hardened but faith-filled, would enter his rest. Three features of OT Scripture converge to demonstrate that God’s “rest” described in Psalm 95 cannot be reduced to the occupation of Canaan through the leadership of Joshua:

- (1) The psalm’s opening word, “today,” expands the audience to include not only David’s generation, long after the conquest of Canaan, but also new covenant believers in Jesus.
- (2) Genesis 2:2 shows that God’s rest transcended the Israelites’ possession of the Promised Land, having begun ages earlier when God finished creating the heavens and the earth.
- (3) The fact that Psalm 95 was written “through David so long afterward” (that is, after the death of the wilderness generation and their children’s entrance into Canaan) indicates that the rest envisioned in the psalm transcends the rest from enemies in the Promised Land at the conclusion of Joshua’s conquest (Heb. 4:6–8).

The immediacy with which the Holy Spirit is addressing believers “today” gives urgency to the hortatory subjunctives (in which the author includes himself with his readers) bracketing the explanation of God’s rest and the way to enter it: “Therefore . . . let us fear” (Heb. 4:1) and “Let us therefore strive” (v. 11). Although

the wilderness generation's unbelief and resultant exclusion from God's rest warrant a response of sober fear, the psalm's implied promise that entry into God's rest is still possible gives hearers hope and fortifies their effort to hold fast in faith.

Section Outline

- I. We are entering God's rest by believing God's word (4:1–5)
 - A. Therefore let us fear, lest anyone fall short of God's rest (4:1)
 - B. Only those hearers who believe the good news of God's rest will enter it (4:2–3c)
 - C. God's rest began when he completed his work of creation (4:3d–4)
 - D. But those who do not believe God will never enjoy his rest (4:5)
- II. In a new "today," God reissues the invitation to enter his rest (4:6–13)
 - A. Through David, long after the conquest of Canaan, God still invites hearers to enter his rest through trusting his word (4:6–7)
 - B. God's rest is far more than the rest from enemies achieved by Joshua's conquest (4:8)
 - C. Believers await a Sabbath celebration to come, when wilderness trials will be over (4:9–10)
 - D. Therefore let us strive to enter God's rest, responding in faith to God's living, heart-probing word (4:11–13)

Comment

4:1 The citation of Psalm 95:7–11 started with the call to hear God's voice with tender hearts (Heb. 3:7–8) and concluded with the divine oath that banned a generation of rebels from God's rest (3:11). These opening and closing statements have led our author to infer that the promise of entering God's rest remained open to subsequent generations, both David's (4:7) and ours (4:1, 3, 11). This inference is elaborated upon and supported in verses 6–7. God's promises concerning future events—things "yet unseen" (11:1, 7)—should elicit a forward-focused faith anchored in hope.

As in 3:12–13 and again in 12:12–15, the whole congregation must "fear" and soberly embrace its corporate responsibility of mutual encouragement, lest any of its members fall short of (*hystereō*, "fail to reach") the "rest" that God has promised in his presence. Those united to Christ no longer fear death (2:15) or human threats (11:27; 13:6). But to have a reverent fear of the living God (10:31; 12:21), which makes us want to please him, is completely consistent with approaching his throne of grace confidently in Jesus (4:14–16).

4:2 The hearers of Hebrews and the Israelites in the desert had in common not only that both groups heard God's voice, but also that they both heard "good news." For the Israelites, good news included God's promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:13–21), his announcement through Moses that he was keeping those promises (Ex. 3:16–17; 4:27–31), and especially the encouragement of Joshua and Caleb at

Kadesh that the Lord would conquer Canaan's pagan peoples and bring his people into the Promised Land (Num. 14:6–9). New covenant believers have heard even better news: the salvation spoken by the Lord Jesus and then confirmed by his apostles (Heb. 2:3–4; cf. 1:14), access to God's presence, freedom from the fear of death, and the hope of sharing the Messiah's crown of glory and ruling the world to come (2:5–15).

A textual variant (cf. ESV mg.) offers a slightly different explanation for why the gospel spoken to the wilderness generation did them no good; this variant could be interpreted as stating either that the *message* was not joined with *faith* in those hearers, or, more likely, that *those who died in the desert* were not united with *those who heard the message in faith*, such as Caleb and Joshua. On either reading, the point is the same: hearing God's voice brings wrath, not benefit, to those who refuse to receive his message with submissive trust.

4:3–4 In contrast to the unbelieving rebels in the desert, “We who have believed enter that rest.” Some scholars argue that the present tense (progressive aspect) of “enter” implies that Christian believers have already left the “wilderness” in which faith is tested and have entered the “Promised Land” of God's rest (to use the typology that Hebrews is drawing from Psalm 95).⁸ Others suggest that the “already–not yet” tension in the Bible explains how Christians already experience God's rest even though they are still summoned to “strive to enter that rest” (Heb. 4:11). Hebrews will later affirm that the church's worship entails *present* participation in heavenly celebration, as we “*have come . . . to . . . the heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:22–24).⁹ Nevertheless, our author presents the trials of the desert, not rest in the Promised Land, as the ancient counterpart to our present experience. “Today,” the redemptive-historical period in which God's voice is heard amid temptations to disbelieve, precedes believers' entrance into God's rest.¹⁰

By characterizing the Promised Land as God's “rest” in reference to God's oath at Kadesh, Psalm 95 invests “rest” with *spatial* associations. Now our author shows that God's rest also has a *temporal* dimension: it began at the birth of the cosmos, when God finished his “works.” In providence and in redemptive intervention, of course, God continues to work (Heb. 3:9; cf. John 5:17), but in terms of the original creation, God “rested . . . from all his works” on the seventh day (Heb. 4:4), delighting in what he had made. This means that God's rest itself stretches temporally over the history of the patriarchs, Israel's Egyptian enslavement and exodus, their forty years in the wilderness, their descendants' occupation of the Promised Land, the days of David, and the “today” in which Hebrew Christians (and we) hear God's voice as this sermon-letter is read.

⁸ Andrew T. Lincoln, “Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament, in D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 177–201; and Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, 99.

⁹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Holman, 2015), 136–137.

¹⁰ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “A Sabbath Rest Still Awaits the People of God,” in C. G. Dennison and R. C. Gamble, *Pressing toward the Mark* (Philadelphia: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 33–51; and O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 164–166.

4:5–7 The author elaborates on the reasoning behind the conclusion stated in verses 1–3, that God’s oath at Kadesh, which denied access to disobedient rebels, implies God’s promise that later generations could enter his rest if they believed and obeyed his voice “today.” Since God had been enjoying his “rest” since creation, while the wilderness generation who “formerly heard good news failed to enter because of disobedience,” God appointed another moment of opportunity, a “today,” at a much later time, the time of King David, centuries after the conquest of Canaan led by Joshua. The significance of this timing for David’s contemporaries and for later generations will be shown in verse 8.

4:8 This is the first of three instances (cf. also 7:11–19; 8:7–13) in which Hebrews argues that various OT passages (such as Psalm 95) imply the insufficiency or imperfection of tokens of God’s grace that were in place when those OT passages were given. The logic of the argument is that God would not have given the OT passages in question at all if those earlier tokens of his kindness had been adequate. Here our preacher reasons that if the “rest” Israel received through Joshua had been full and final, “God would not have spoken of another day later on.” That is, he would not have spoken as he did through David in Psalm 95, announcing the prospect of entering his rest to a generation already inhabiting the Promised Land. Our author undoubtedly knows the summation that concludes the conquest of Canaan:

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to give to their fathers. . . . And the LORD *gave them rest* on every side just as he had sworn to their fathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass. (Josh. 21:43–45)

Nevertheless, the fact that God spoke Psalm 95 to David’s generation, after the rest achieved through Joshua’s conquest had given way to the turmoil of the period of the judges and Saul’s monarchy, shows that “my rest” cannot be reduced to occupation of the Promised Land, or to a short-lived respite from warfare while residing in Canaan.

“Rest” returned at one point in David’s reign, for the narrator of Samuel echoes Joshua 21: “The king lived in his house and the LORD had *given him rest* from all his surrounding enemies” (2 Sam. 7:1). Nevertheless, for the psalm’s first audience in David’s generation, “today” and “God’s rest” still represented contrasting and successive timeframes. “Today” God’s voice was speaking, summoning hearers to embrace his promise with faith-filled hearts. The object of God’s promise was his “rest,” a future destination of *unthreatened and uninterrupted communion* with God, who is already resting from his creative labors. Canaan was merely a sign pointing upward and forward to the reality of God’s rest. The land promised to the patriarchs as they remained “strangers and exiles on earth” was not, after all,

a homeland in this sin-sullied world but rather “a better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13–16).

4:9–10 Now for a third time our author assures us of the blessedness that “remains” available to those who, in our “today,” hear God’s voice and embrace his message with forward-focused faith. The promise of entering God’s rest remains, spoken through David not only to his contemporaries but also to new covenant believers (4:1). Their entrance “remains” a real possibility, since the “today” that God appointed for our response continues into the present (4:6). Consequently, a Sabbath rest “remains” for the people of God (4:9). The Greek terms shift from the “rest” (*katapausis*) linking Psalm 95:11 and Genesis 2:2 to a noun (*sabbatismos*) not found elsewhere in biblical Greek (LXX or NT). This term is derived from a verb that means to “keep Sabbath” or “celebrate Sabbath.” This new term adds, to the motif of “rest” as *cessation* from labor, the new note of *celebration* of freedom and joyful communion with God in his rest.

This Sabbath celebration remains *future* for God’s people, who trek as pilgrims through the hostile and faith-challenging wilderness of this world. This future character of “rest” is the point of the general maxim of verse 10, although at first glance it seems to speak of past or present experience: “Whoever *has entered* God’s rest *has also rested* from his works.” In other words, entering God’s rest coincides with ceasing one’s labors, in imitation of God’s cessation of his creative labors on the seventh day of Genesis 2:2. Some theologians have understood “resting from one’s works” as no longer relying on one’s own obedience, trusting instead in Christ and his all-sufficient righteousness (cf. Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; Phil. 3:3–9). In support, they interpret “repentance from dead works” (Heb. 6:1) as a renunciation of efforts at commandment-keeping pursued in self-reliance and self-righteousness.

For the recipients of Hebrews, however, the danger posed by Judaism was not a misplaced reliance on their own law-keeping but a misguided inclination to return to the sanctuary and sacrifices of the old covenant, abandoning Jesus and his once-for-all, conscience-purifying sacrifice. Here, the individual who rests from his works is not turning away from “works” assessed negatively. Rather, he is following God’s *positive* example in Genesis, which set the precedent for Israel’s weekly Sabbath observance. Resting from one’s works marks the completion of the labors of this pilgrim life, along the lines of the benediction in Revelation 14:13: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. . . . that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

4:11 Because entry into God’s rest, which brings the cessation of our labors, is yet future, the preacher appeals to that destiny to motivate strenuous exertion: “Let us therefore *strive* to enter that rest.” Perhaps the imagery of the Christian life as an athletic race (cf. 6:20; 12:1–3, 12–13) lies in the background of the author’s choice of the verb translated “strive” (*spoudazō*), which urges hearers to expend all of their reserves of spiritual energy to persevere in faith and help one another endure. Lest any of their number “fall by the same sort of disobedience” as those who died in

the wilderness, the whole congregation must support its weak, wounded, and prone-to-wander members (cf. 3:12–13; 4:1; 12:12–15).

4:12–13 The exposition and application of Psalm 95, which warns against hearing God’s voice with hardened hearts, draws to a fitting close in a description of God’s word as living and effective, sharp enough to cut to the heart’s hidden depths, discerning our secret thoughts and intentions. Scripture elsewhere compares the word to a sharp sword wielded by the Lord’s servant, the divine warrior whose very name is “the word of God” (Isa. 49:2; Eph. 6:17; cf. Rev. 1:16; 2:12; 19:13–15). As the speech of the living God (Heb. 3:12; Deut. 5:26), who binds himself by swearing an oath based on his endless life (Heb. 3:11; 6:13–18; Num. 14:21–23; Gen. 22:15–18), the word itself is alive. God knows everyone through and through, and no creature is hidden from his eyes, for all lie exposed and utterly vulnerable. Therefore his word cuts us to the core.

The mention of “the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow” is intended not to draw psychological or anatomical distinctions but to dramatize the skill by which God uses his word to penetrate our apparently impenetrable recesses. The God who sees our hidden inner life (Acts 1:24; 15:8; Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 4:5) is a judge who will not be deceived by pious appearances (Isa. 11:3–4; John 2:23–25). Mercifully, this all-seeing divine judge has provided for guilty rebels a Great High Priest, Jesus the Son of God, who has experienced their temptations and now represents them before his throne—a throne of *grace*—in heaven (Heb. 4:14–16).

Response

Two exhortations—“let us fear” and “let us . . . strive” (Heb. 4:1, 11)—surround the concluding phase of the discussion of Psalm 95. These admonitions signal the responses that the Holy Spirit, who is speaking Psalm 95 yet “today,” seeks as he invites us to enter God’s rest through heeding his voice with trusting hearts. The history of the Israelite rebels at Kadesh should move us to sober fear. They refused to believe the good news that they heard, and their bodies fell in the wilderness. We must avoid at all cost their example of doubt and disobedience. Yet the land their children subsequently occupied was a sign pointing upward and forward to a far better “rest”—God’s rest, which remains open to those who believe the good news now delivered by God’s last, best spokesman, Jesus the Son. We strive in anticipation of the rest that awaits us at the climax of our earthly pilgrimage, for it is faith in Christ’s work (not ours) that places us in the lifelong process of entering God’s rest.

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 4:14–7:28

The central section of this sermon-letter explores its main point (Heb. 8:1), the superior high priestly ministry of Jesus in contrast to the priestly mediation of the Aaronic priests descended from the tribe of Levi. This discussion has two parts: First, our preacher shows that Jesus' *qualifications* for priestly office in the order of Melchizedek, foretold in Psalm 110:4, surpass those of the priests descended from Aaron (Heb. 4:14–7:28). Second, he demonstrates how Jesus' priestly *ministry* is superior with respect to the heavenly sanctuary in which he serves and the conscience-cleansing sacrifice he has offered (8:1–10:31). At this point in the sermon (4:14), emphasis shifts from Christ's role in *revelation*—his superiority to prophets, angels, and Moses (1:1–4:13)—to Christ's role in *reconciliation*—his superiority to the OT priestly office associated with the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron and to the animal sacrifices those priests offered in Israel's earthly sanctuary.

Hebrews 4:14–7:28 directs our attention to the qualifications authorizing Jesus to be our “great high priest” (4:14), “a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God” on our behalf, as he was previously described (2:17). In order to be the merciful intercessor that weak sinners need, Jesus must be fully human, tempted, and acquainted by personal experience with weakness and suffering (4:14–5:3, 7–8). He must also be appointed by God, not self-nominated, to the privilege of standing on others' behalf in the presence of the Holy One (5:4–6, 9–10). In both of these respects Jesus' priestly qualifications and appointment resemble Aaron's. But Jesus' qualifications are better than Aaron's, for he is the royal priest “after the order of Melchizedek,” foretold in Psalm 110:4. This priesthood derives its authority not from a principle of genealogical descent traced back through Aaron to Levi but from an oath sworn by God himself, which secures this priest's office “forever” by “the power of an indestructible life” (Heb. 7:1–28).

Jesus' superior, eternal priestly office, fulfilling the pattern left by the mysterious Melchizedek of Genesis 14, is a theme on which much needs to be said. But the hearers' dullness of ears will make it “hard to explain” (Heb. 5:11). Therefore, amid his elaboration of Jesus' Melchizedek-like priestly appointment, our preacher again embeds a bracing exhortation. He calls his hearers to grow up by imitating Abraham's faith, for God's oath gives us every reason to trust his promises (5:11–6:20).

HEBREWS 4:14–5:10

¹⁴Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

5 For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. ³Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. ⁴And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

⁵So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him,

“You are my Son,
today I have begotten you”;

⁶as he says also in another place,

“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus¹ offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. ⁸Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, ¹⁰being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

¹Greek *he*

Section Overview: Our Tested and Sympathetic High Priest

Having instilled in his hearers a fear of rebelling against God’s voice and thus failing to enter God’s rest, our pastor turns to the only theme that can assuage a guilty and terrified conscience: the high priestly ministry of Jesus. The author’s pastoral strategy is to motivate his hearers’ perseverance by issuing terrifying warnings about the dire consequences of unbelief (Heb. 6:4–8; 10:26–31) and then offering encouragements grounded in God’s grace (6:9–12; 10:32–39). With warnings he prods Christians out of complacency. With encouragements he safeguards them

from misgivings about God's gracious disposition toward those who, despite their weakness and sin, nonetheless approach him through Jesus.

Two qualifications for priestly mediation between a holy God and his unholy people are shared by the OT priests (Aaron and his descendants) and the Great High Priest (Jesus Christ): human weakness and divine call. Since both the Aaronic priests and Jesus have experienced weakness and temptation, they can extend sympathy to the tempted, weak, and failing worshipers for whom they offer sacrifice and intercession. And both the OT high priests and Jesus have been authorized by God to enter his Holy Place and approach his throne. God is so majestic a sovereign that no creature may seize for himself the honor of approaching God on behalf of others. That privilege can be granted only by the King himself. These shared qualifications are discussed in chiastic order:

- (A) Christ's weakness and sympathy (4:14–16)
- (B) Aaron's weakness and sympathy (5:1–3)
- (B') Aaron's call from God (5:4)
- (A') Christ's call from God (5:5–10)

Although Aaron and Jesus have these priestly credentials in common, the contrasts between them are even more striking. Jesus, though tempted in weakness, withstood every temptation “without sin” (4:15). Aaron, on the other hand, had to “offer sacrifice for his own sins” before he could do so for the people (5:3; cf. 7:27). As Hebrews 7:15–26 will elaborate, Jesus is priest “forever” (5:6, citing Ps. 110:4), whereas God appointed Aaron and his descendants through a principle of genealogy that presupposed their deaths.

Section Outline

- I. Jesus, like Aaron, is qualified to serve as a merciful priest through his experience of human weakness and testing (4:14–5:3)
 - A. Jesus, the Son of God, is a priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses, so we must hold to our confession and draw near to God's throne of grace (4:14–16)
 - B. Aaron and his sons were priests beset by weakness, so they could deal gently with the wayward (5:1–3)
- II. Like Aaron, Jesus is qualified to serve as a faithful priest through his appointment by God (5:4–10)
 - A. Aaron and his sons were called by God to be priests (5:4)
 - B. Christ the Son was appointed by God as priest, consecrated for his ministry through suffering and resurrection (5:5–10)

Comment

4:14 In Hebrews 2:17–18 Jesus was introduced as a “*merciful and faithful high priest*,” “*made like his brothers in every respect*,” who “*suffered when tempted*” so that he can *help* those who are likewise tempted. The reappearance of these italicized

words links 4:14–16 to 2:17–18. Later, our preacher will signal the conclusion of his discussion of Jesus' priestly office and ministry by repeating terms from 4:14–16 in 10:19–25: "Since *we have a great priest . . . let us draw near . . . Let us hold fast the confession.*"

In the Hebrew OT, the expression behind our English "the high priest" is "the great priest" (*hakkohen haggadol*), and the LXX usually reflects this formulation (*ho hierous ho megas*) (Num. 35:25–32; cf. Heb. 10:21). Here, to emphasize our High Priest's superiority to the order of Aaron, our author adds the adjective "great" to the Greek term "high priest" (*archiereus*), which emerged in later Greek (*Maccabees* and NT). Two features show Jesus' superior priestly status. First, he has "passed through the heavens." This exaltation is implied in his seat at God's right hand (Ps. 110:1, introduced in Heb. 1:3, 13). The heavenly venue Jesus entered as priest is the original sanctuary, of which the earthly tabernacle was a copy (7:26; 8:4–5; 9:11–12, 24). Second, Jesus is "the Son of God," whom God addressed as such in Psalm 2:7 (Heb. 1:5). As Son he is the radiance of God's glory, the agent of creation, the ruler worthy to be addressed as "God," and the ruler over God's house.

Earlier exhortations to "hold fast our confession" were supported by a negative motive: the spiritual peril of unbelief in the face of wilderness trials (cf. 3:6, 12–14). Now the motive is positive: our Great High Priest suffered with us and can help us. "Confession" (*homologia*) signals believers' corporate responsibility to encourage each other's perseverance, as it refers to what Christians believe and verbally affirm together (3:1; 10:23).

4:15 The arresting use of a double negative, "*not . . . a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,*" implies that the Great High Priest's identification with weak and tempted sinners is unexpected in light of his divine dignity. Earlier, the truth that the Son is "not ashamed to call them brothers" took us by surprise (2:11–12). Now his *sympathy* astonishes us.

The English "sympathize," although derived from the Greek verb used here (*sympatheō*; also in 10:34), may mislead us. When we "sympathize" with sufferers, we attempt to identify emotionally with their distress. Jesus goes deeper, *sharing* his people's experience of suffering, having been tempted when suffering (2:18) and having learned obedience from what he suffered (5:8). Greek speakers would hear the resonance of "sympathize," "deal gently" (*metriopathein*; 5:2), and "suffer" (*epathen*; 5:8) in this section.

Our preacher previously affirmed the Son's complete participation in human flesh and blood, becoming "like his brothers in every respect" (2:14, 17). Now he introduces the crucial exception to the similarity between Jesus and other human beings: though tempted in every way as they are, Jesus withstood every temptation "without sin." Jesus' complete innocence and freedom from sin is affirmed throughout the NT (Luke 23:41; John 7:18; 8:46; 14:30–31; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5). Without this difference, he could not be our perfectly "*faithful high priest in the service of God*" (Heb. 2:17). But in fact he is "holy, inno-

cent, unstained, separated from sinners” (7:26–27). Jesus’ sinless purity sets him apart from every priest in Aaron’s line (5:2–3).

4:16 With such a High Priest, simultaneously compassionate and sinless, we can “with confidence draw near” to God’s divine throne. To those who approach through Jesus’ mediation, it is a “throne of grace.” The imagery evoked by “drawing near” is the approach of worshipers to the sanctuary (7:25; 10:1) and the high priest’s entrance into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement (10:19–21). Elsewhere in the NT, “confidence” (*parrēsia*) characterizes fearless proclamation (Acts 4:13; 9:28; 14:3; Eph. 6:19; Phil. 1:20). In Hebrews, “confidence” entails the worshipers’ anticipation of divine favor as they draw near to God (3:6; 10:19, 35), their consciences cleansed of guilt through Jesus’ sacrifice so that the “consuming fire” (12:29) of God’s holiness no longer threatens them.

“Mercy” and “grace” are related, but mercy may refer specifically to forgiveness while grace may refer more generally to the unmerited favor by which God strengthens struggling hearts (13:9). God’s grace brings timely help—just when temptation and suffering are most intense. The translation “in time of need” represents a single adjective, *eukairos*. Elsewhere in the NT this word group refers to opportune moments (Mark 6:21; 14:11; 2 Tim. 4:2).

5:1 This verse sums up the high priest’s qualifications and tasks, thereby implying how fitting Christ’s incarnation, temptation, and suffering are to his ministry as the “great high priest.” The following sentences unpack aspects of this description. “Every high priest” is “from among men,” sharing human nature and weakness with others so that he can “act on behalf of men in relation to God” (cf. 5:2–3, 9). He is “chosen” (or “taken,” *lambanomenos*) through God’s initiative and “appointed” (*kathistēmi*, see Num. 3:10 LXX) by God, not self-nominated (Heb. 5:4–5, 10). He is appointed “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (cf. 5:3, 7–8).

5:2–3 The Aaronic high priest could “deal gently” with people who violated God’s commands inadvertently, in ignorance. (The law distinguished sins committed “unintentionally” from defiant rebellion: Num. 15:27–31; Lev. 4:2, 13, 22, 27.) As noted in the comment on Heb. 4:15, the Greek verb (*metriopatheō*) reflected in “deal gently” shares a stem (*path-*) with “sympathize” (4:15). But the parallel between Jesus and Aaron is not exact. Aaron’s gentle treatment of the wayward meant restraining his reaction of righteous indignation or revulsion over others’ failures. Such restraint was fitting, since Aaron was not only “beset” by weakness but was also guilty of sins, needing atonement himself. Jesus’ compassion is more outgoing and tender, not compelled by a guilty conscience (for he was “without sin”; 4:15) but moved with a pity that can spring only from pure innocence.

The rituals for the Day of Atonement demonstrated the guilt of every OT high priest. Before he could offer a sacrifice for the people’s sins, he had to offer a bull “as a sin offering for himself and . . . make atonement for himself and for his house” (Lev. 16:6–14). Then he could “kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the

people” (Lev. 16:15–19). Our preacher will keep before our minds this crucial difference between Aaron’s sin-stained line and our sinless mediator (Heb. 7:27; 9:7).

5:4 The honor of approaching the sovereign Lord is not ours for the taking but can be bestowed only by God himself. The Lord called Aaron and his sons to serve as Israel’s priestly intercessors (Ex. 28:1). The Levite Korah and his Reubenite coconspirators challenged Aaron’s unique access to God’s presence (Numbers 16), but God destroyed the rebels and reaffirmed his choice of Aaron by causing Aaron’s staff alone to sprout buds and blossoms (Num. 17:8–10; Heb. 9:4).

5:5–6 “So also Christ” did not seize the glory of high priestly office for himself. The ESV “exalt” could be rendered “glorify” (*doxazō*). “Honor” and “glory” have appeared together in Hebrews 2:7, 9; 3:3. Our author has already used the title “Christ” (Anointed One) and spoken of his anointing (3:6, 14; cf. 1:9). Here the title brings us back to Psalm 2:7, the first of the OT series of passages addressing the Son’s superiority to angels (Heb. 1:5), in which the Lord declares to his Anointed One, “You are my Son.” The syntax of this direct address is parallel to Psalm 110:4: “You are a priest.” The grammatical parallel linking these “You are . . .” statements supports the identification drawn in Hebrews 4:14: the “great high priest” is “the Son of God.” Other features of Psalm 110:4—this priest’s “forever” tenure in office and the template provided by the ancient priest-king Melchizedek—will be unfolded in chapter 7.

5:7 The procedure by which God installed Christ as priest was neither ritualized (as was Aaron’s) nor painless. Thus, in elaborating the truth that Christ received his priestly appointment by God’s decree, our author elaborates on the suffering under testing that made Jesus the most merciful of priests. The “days of his flesh” were the period of his humble incarnate life on earth, from the moment he came to share our flesh and blood (2:14), assuming a true human body vulnerable to harm and death (10:5–10), to his resurrection from the dead.

The same liturgical term (*prospherō*) that had been used to describe the high priest’s “offering” of sacrifices for sins (5:1, 3) now describes how Jesus “offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears.” The desperate pleas that Christ offered corresponded in some way to the animals sacrificed by Aaronic priests. Jesus’ prayers, shouts, and tears “to him who was able to save him from death” became intense in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:41–44) and then on the cross. But even before then our Lord had drawn words from Psalm 6:3–4 to lament, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name” (John 12:27–28). His plea, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me” (Mark 14:36), was a desperate appeal to “him who was able to save him from death.”

The cup of divine wrath was not removed without the sinless Savior’s draining it to its dregs. How, then, can our preacher claim (in words drawn from Pss. 22:24;

116:1) that Jesus “was heard” by the God to whom he cried for rescue? In Scripture, for God to “hear” is for him to answer his servants’ petition in the affirmative. Some theorize that the request referenced here was not for deliverance from death but was rather “Not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36) or “Glorify your name” (John 12:28). But the description of God as “him who was able to save him from death” gives us the content of Christ’s petition. Only through his resurrection was Jesus’ plea for rescue from death both heard and answered “because of his reverence.” His reverent offering of his body in accord with the Father’s will (Heb. 10:5–10) was rewarded when “the God of peace . . . brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus” (13:20; cf. Acts 2:24–28). God’s answer came “not by Jesus escaping death, or the fear of death, but by his transcending death through his resurrection and exaltation at God’s right hand.”¹¹

5:8 The Son’s path to priesthood passed through suffering. From the standpoint of his divine identity, his suffering is incongruous, as the concessive “*although* he was a son” shows. For human sons and daughters—the “many sons” whom God is bringing to glory (2:10)—suffering is to be expected as a sign of our legitimacy in the faith (12:5–8). But it is shocking that the unique Son, who is the radiance of God’s glory, would suffer and would “learn obedience” through that suffering. The author skillfully conjoins forms of the Greek verbs “learn” (*manthanō*) and “suffer” (*paschō*) that rhyme with each other: *emathen* . . . *epathen* (“he learned . . . he suffered”). A gifted rhetorician, our preacher gives attention to how his language will strike hearers’ ears.

The Son’s uniqueness in contrast to humans sets his “learning” apart from theirs. Human children “learn obedience” through correction after they disobey, whereas Jesus never disobeyed (4:15). His “learning obedience,” therefore, did not involve the painful correction that sinful children need. Instead it involved his experiential encounter, throughout his life and climaxing in his death, with the overwhelming personal cost of the commitment he embraced as he entered our world at his incarnation: “When Christ came into the world, he said, ‘. . . Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book’” (10:5–7).

5:9–10 Although suffering is incompatible with the Son’s deity, it was both fitting and necessary to his priestly office as our *merciful* High Priest for Christ to experience our weakness and the pangs of our suffering. This mission is what required him to share fully in our embodied, vulnerable humanity (2:14–18). Thus the author concludes this discussion of Jesus’ installation into priestly office in two syntactically parallel and semantically complementary ways:

- being made perfect . . .
- being designated by God a high priest . . .

¹¹ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 146.

As noted in the comment on 2:10, for Christ to be “made perfect” (*teleiōō*) refers not to his transition from a state of moral defect into blamelessness but rather to his induction into priestly office, reflecting LXX usage in passages describing the consecration of OT priests (Ex. 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev. 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num. 3:3; etc.). Here the parallel participle “being designated by God a high priest” (Heb. 5:10) confirms this interpretation of “made perfect.”

Through weakness, temptation, suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus has been inducted into a uniquely superior high priestly order. This order is “after the order of Melchizedek,” heavenly and everlasting, a topic on which our preacher will have “much to say,” following an extensive exhortation to his hearers (5:11–6:20). Yet Jesus’ ministry is better than that of Aaron not only because of its celestial venue and longevity but also because of its purifying and reconciling effectiveness. Jesus has become “the source of *eternal* salvation to all who obey him” (5:9) because he entered God’s sanctuary with his own blood, “securing an *eternal* redemption” (9:11–14). Isaiah praised the Lord for saving Israel with “everlasting salvation” (Isa. 45:17), and the cross demonstrates the price the Son paid to “save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (Heb. 7:25).

Response

Two exhortations in Hebrews 4:14–16 show the response that God intends to elicit from us as he reveals the perfect, permanent High Priest, “Jesus, the Son of God.” Along the route of our pilgrimage through this life’s “wilderness,” from the slavery behind us to the eternal safety of the home ahead, we must, first, “hold fast our confession” (4:14). Together, as companions in Christ’s community, we must support and reinforce one another’s conviction, confidence, and commitment to the living God who speaks in Scripture. Yet, beset with weakness as we are, how can fragile, fickle people like us “hold fast”?

The second exhortation shows the way: “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace” (4:16), for there we will receive mercy, grace, and timely help. The resource fortifying our perseverance is the grace that God bestows when we enter his presence. But we dare enter his presence only because he has provided a Great High Priest, perfect in his reverent piety toward God and simultaneously compassionate toward us, having experienced temptation and suffering. Jesus has “passed through the heavens” (4:14) to serve on our behalf in his Father’s presence, and so we dare to draw near. There we will find the Father’s storehouses of sustaining grace thrown wide open to us in our need.

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 5:11–6:20

Our preacher has introduced the sermon's central motif, Jesus' ministry as "high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:6, 10), a topic about which he has "much to say" (5:11). But before he explains why the priesthood patterned after Melchizedek is better than that of Aaron, the author pauses to issue a blunt rebuke to his hearers for their "dull" ears and immature spiritual appetite, which complicate his teaching task. He urges them to grow up in faith. The boundaries of this exhortation section are signaled by the mention of "a high priest after the order of Melchizedek" at its beginning (5:10) and end (6:20).

The exhortation comes in two phases. The first phase (5:11–6:12) opens and closes with *nōthros* ("dull" in 5:11; "sluggish" in 6:12). Its tone is primarily negative, rebuking immaturity and warning against apostasy. We will examine this first phase in two installments: a summons to grow up (5:11–6:3) and a terrifying warning against apostasy, accompanied by a word of reassurance (6:4–12).

The second phase of the exhortation (6:13–20) springs from the mention of exemplars of persevering faith (6:12), among whom Abraham is prominent. Abraham's history motivates hearers by focusing on the oath by which God guaranteed his promises to Abraham and others "who have fled for refuge" to God's care (6:16). The mention of Abraham and the motif of oath converge to bring the discussion back to Melchizedek (6:20), the patriarch's priestly mediator (7:1–10) and the pattern for a superior priestly order, secured by God's oath (7:11–28).

HEBREWS 5:11–6:3

¹¹About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, ¹³for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

6 Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ²and of instruction about washings,¹ the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And this we will do if God permits.

¹Or *baptisms* (that is, cleansing rites)

Section Overview: Exhortation: Move On to Maturity

The metaphor of infants' and adults' intellectual and dietary capacities unifies this section. The hearers have followed Jesus long enough that their grasp of the gospel and response to persecution should be more mature than it is. By now they should understand God's words well enough to teach others, but instead they need someone to teach them the simple alphabet. They should be able to chew solid food but can only ingest milk, lacking the discernment that comes through practice in applying God's word to life. They remain fixated on foundational OT doctrines and practices that belong to (lit.) "the beginning of the word of the Messiah" (*ton tēs archēs tou Christou logon*; Heb. 6:1). These preliminary elements are related to Christ and his mission, but the hearers should have been discerning enough to understand them in the context of God's "last days" speaking in the Son. Our preacher therefore summons his hearers to move forward into maturity, and he intends to lead them there as God enables them.

Section Outline

- I. Your dull immaturity impedes your grasp of Christ's superior priesthood (5:11–14)
 - A. Your dull ears impede your understanding of vital truth (5:11)
 - B. Your immaturity is inexcusable in light of your longevity in faith (5:12a)
 - C. Your immaturity restricts your spiritual diet (5:12b–14)
 1. You need milky basics, not firm food (5:12bc)
 2. Babies cannot ingest the solid word of righteousness (5:13)
 3. Adults consume solid food with theological and ethical discernment (5:14)
- II. We must advance toward maturity, rather than remaining in the basics (6:1–3)
 - A. We must move on from OT foundations, the beginning of the Messiah's word (6:1–2)
 1. Foundations of covenant commitment: repentance and faith
 2. Foundations of cultic cleansing: ritual washings and laying on of hands
 3. Foundations of covenant sanctions: resurrection and judgment
 - B. We can move toward maturity only through God's aid (6:3)

Comment

5:11 Jesus' priesthood in the order of Melchizedek deserves an explanation that will be both lengthy and "hard to explain." The source of the difficulty lies not in the complexity of the subject but in the sluggishness of the students. They have become "dull of hearing," sluggish in their organs of hearing (*akoais*; cf. Mark 7:35; Acts 17:20). Greek had a specific word for "ear" (*ous*; Matt. 11:15), but the term used here fits Psalm 95's warning against *hearing* God's voice in unbelief.

The preacher is about to embarrass his hearers for their infantile incapacity to "digest" the solid food he intends to serve. But theirs is not a case of arrested development. It is worse: they "have become" sluggish, relapsing from an earlier, healthier spiritual state, of which he will remind them (Heb. 6:9–10; 10:32–34). A confluence of external opposition and internal misgivings about the sufficiency of Christ threatens to pull them back from their prior confidence and courage.

5:12 The preacher's original hearers have been followers of Jesus long enough that their immaturity is inexcusable. By now they "ought to be teachers." Not every Christian has the spiritual gift and ecclesiastical office of teaching (1 Cor. 12:27–30; James 3:1), but all should be maturing in their grasp of biblical truth and its application, able to "exhort one another every day" against sin's deceitfulness (Heb. 3:12–13; cf. Rom. 15:14; Heb. 10:24–25). Extending the educational imagery, they need to be sent back to the beginning: "basic principles" represents the Greek *stoicheia*, which can refer to a language's alphabet, the starting point of learning to read. They are like "children in the kindergarten who, unable to read or write, have to start at the very beginning by learning their ABCs."¹² The "basic principles of the oracles of God" are "the elementary doctrine of Christ" (Heb. 6:1)—a connection visible in Greek through the repetition of key terms (*archē*; *logiōn/logos*). These principles include the six features constituting the "foundation" from which believers in Jesus must advance (cf. comment on 6:1–2).

5:13–14 At the end of verse 12 the imagery shifts from the school classroom to the family dining room, where infants imbibe milk while solid food is reserved for the mature. The "child" who lives on milk is very young (*nēpios*), an infant not yet able to chew solid food. "Solid food" corresponds to the rich instruction our preacher wishes to impart, if his hearers' spiritual lethargy can be overcome. The "word of righteousness," with which babies are "unskilled" or unacquainted, includes Jesus' high priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. But it also has a strong ethical component, since the mature have moral discernment to distinguish good from evil. The apostle Paul used the same metaphor to rebuke the Christians of Corinth, who displayed their childishness in boastful competition: "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. . . . For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?" (1 Cor. 3:2–3).

¹² Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 190.

A third metaphor, athletic training through “constant practice,” shows that growth in discernment does not occur through theological instruction alone. Our preacher will invoke athletic imagery also in Hebrews 6:20 (“forerunner”) and in 12:1–2, 11–13 (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24–27; Phil. 3:13–14; 1 Tim. 4:7–8; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7). As Psalm 95 showed, hearing God’s voice must be met by a readiness to trust his words and respond appropriately. Like an athlete’s muscles, the believer’s skill to make choices pleasing to God grows strong when “trained” (*gegymnasmena*) through repeated exercise in obedient action. “Discernment” (*aisthētēria*; only here in NT) is accurate perception of reality, enabling one to weigh the relative value of alternative courses of action and choose what is superior. Using a cognate term, Paul prayed that Philippian Christians would be given “discernment” (*aisthēsis*) to approve of what is excellent (Phil. 1:9–10).

The need to “distinguish good from evil” probably alludes to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the issue it posed: By what standard—by whose word—would Adam and Eve make ethical decisions (Gen. 2:16–17; 3:1–7)? Sin is deceitful, as Eve sadly acknowledged (Gen. 3:13) and as our author has said (Heb. 3:13). Discernment is needed to expose Satan’s plausible-sounding lies.

6:1–2 A symptom of the hearers’ immaturity is their preoccupation with the “elementary doctrine of Christ,” that is, aspects of God’s revelation belonging to the era “long ago,” when “God spoke to our fathers by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1). “The beginning of the word of the Messiah” (woodenly rendering the Greek) is another description of “the basic principles [alphabet] of the oracles of God” (5:12). Christians are to “leave” this earlier revelation, but not by dismissing it as worthless, for it is a “foundation” for faith that has been laid and does not need to be re-laid. Rather, from this foundational revelation we are to be carried forward toward maturity as we learn to interpret God’s earlier speech and the institutions it established in light of the Son, God’s last and best word (1:2–4).

The preacher exhorts, “let us . . . go on” (lit., “let us be carried”) toward maturity. His choice of verb (*pherō*), mood (subjunctive, functioning as imperative), and voice (passive) expresses the dynamic of spiritual growth: believers are responsible to “strive for . . . holiness” (Heb. 12:14), as the hortatory subjunctive conveys, but our efforts are utterly dependent upon God’s sovereign initiative and strong help, as we are “carried” by his Spirit, as 6:3 will remind us.

The foundation from which believers must be carried forward as they move toward maturity is summarized in six items, grouped in three pairs:

- (1) Repentance from dead works and faith toward God;
- (2) instruction about washings and the laying on of hands;
- (3) resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment.

Many scholars understand these six foundational features as doctrines and practices identified with individuals’ initial conversion to Christ and identification with his church:

- (1) a spiritual “about-face,” turning from sinful practices¹³ and trusting God (Mark 1:15; Acts 2:38; 20:21);
- (2) visible rites, namely baptism and the laying on of hands (to convey the Holy Spirit) (Acts 8:17–19; 9:17; 19:6);
- (3) teaching about the alternative outcomes of faith and unbelief: resurrection or judgment.

But the second couplet does not seem to refer to elements of Christian conversion. The ESV rightly reads “washings,” not “baptism,” because the Greek term (*baptismois*) is plural (not singular) and masculine in gender (*baptismos*), not neuter (*baptisma*). The neuter noun is the NT term referring to the baptisms by John the Baptizer and later of believers (Mark 1:4; Eph. 4:5), while the masculine noun used here reappears in the NT only in Hebrews 9:10 and Mark 7:4, always referring to *ceremonial washings* related to the OT and Judaism. Moreover, the laying on of hands to impart the Holy Spirit to recent converts is a rare feature in exceptional cases (Acts 8:17; 9:17; 19:6). In the NT (and the OT), the laying on of hands appears in the ordination of leaders (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22), but that rite is not connected to *entering* into the Christian life.

A better approach is to see these six phrases as *OT themes* foundational to the revelation of the Messiah and his mission:

- (1) The core of covenant commitment: repentance and trust;
- (2) cultic cleansing for covenant communion: washings (Heb. 9:10) and the laying of hands (on sacrificial animals, symbolizing transfer of worshipers’ guilt to substitutes) (9:7, 11–14; Lev. 8:14–22; 16:21–22);
- (3) covenant sanctions of blessing and cursing: resurrection and eternal judgment.

The contents of the first and third couplets do not differ significantly, whichever view we take of the “beginning of the word of the Christ.” But interpreting all six features as aspects of the OT foundation makes better sense of the second couplet and of this list’s relation to the redemptive-historical perspective of Hebrews.

6:3 Our preacher intends to lead his hearers from ancient foundations to their fulfillment in Jesus, from the now-obsolete covenant of Sinai to the new and better covenant promised through Jeremiah and mediated by Jesus (8:5–13). But his hearers will grasp the good news he has to impart only “if God permits.” The preacher makes explicit what is implied in the divine passive (“let us be carried”) of verse 1: they need to be “carried” forward by the God of grace. In pursuing spiritual growth toward maturity, our effort (which is required) must be humbly dependent on God’s enabling power (Phil. 1:6; 2:12–13; 1 Thess. 5:23–24).

¹³ In Hebrews “dead works” (here and 9:14) are not “works of the law” (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16) but evil deeds that violate God’s commands and deserve death.

Response

We have been tantalized by mentions of Jesus' high priestly ministry (2:17–3:1; 4:14–5:10), but our author defers a richer exposition of that theme in order to issue an urgent exhortation. This exhortation opens with a summons to grow up, to rouse ourselves from the spiritual sloth impeding our understanding of the oracles of God and obscuring our perception of how the ABCs of the OT Scriptures find fulfillment in the Christ. But the maturity we need in order to ingest, digest, and profit from “solid food” is not merely theological insight. Like athletes in training, we must exercise our wills by constant practice, again and again choosing good over evil, faith over unbelief. Throughout the discipline that builds discernment, we know we can grow only as “God permits.” And so we draw near in humble dependence, relying on his grace to bring us timely help as we strive for holiness.

HEBREWS 6:4–12

⁴For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. ⁷For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.

⁹Though we speak in this way, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things—things that belong to salvation. ¹⁰For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. ¹¹And we desire each one of you to show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹²so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Section Overview: Warning against Apostasy and Comforting Reassurance

This daunting warning, with its stark pronouncement that apostasy from a faith in Christ once professed cannot be reversed, is the most troubling passage in this entire sermon-letter. (Its parallel in Hebrews 10:26–31 conveys the same terrifying truth, that apostasy is irreversible: “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment”; 10:26–27.)

Theologically, this text seems to call into question the comforting teaching of other NT passages, that Jesus gives his sheep *eternal* life, and no one can “snatch them out of [his] hand” (John 10:28); that all those whom God justifies he will eventually

glorify (Rom. 8:30); and, within this same sermon-letter, that Jesus is “able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him” (Heb. 7:25). Those who believe God’s sovereign grace to be more dominant than human freedom of choice find their convictions challenged here. But this passage also challenges those who believe that our choice is the decisive factor in salvation, for this text asserts that a decision to turn one’s back on God’s Son and his heavenly benefits *can never be reversed*.

Our preacher, in applying Psalm 95:7–11, presented Israel’s wilderness experience as a paradigm for the Christian church’s present pilgrimage (Heb. 3:7–4:13). To hear God’s voice and see his works were great privileges, yet they brought no eternally saving benefit to those Israelites who failed to respond in faith. Even more so, God has lavished heavenly benefits on the new covenant community as the “house” of his Son (3:6). Yet members of this visible church who, lacking persevering faith, renounce their allegiance to the Son of God, will receive no eternal blessing but only compounded curse.

Hebrews draws a distinction between the constituency of the church as we view it from our finite perspective and those whom God knows to be joined to Christ by living and lasting faith (cf. 2 Tim. 2:19). Likewise, Hebrews implies a distinction between the *temporal and external* benefits of participation in God’s covenant community—whether it be ancient Israel or the new covenant church—and the *eternal and internal* salvation received by living, lasting faith in Christ.

This warning is intended to challenge the presumptuous, but it may also alarm and unsettle the sensitive consciences of sincere believers. Aware of this danger, the author immediately reassures his hearers with reminders of the evidence of good fruit that God’s word and Spirit have previously borne in their lives (Heb. 6:9–12).

Section Outline

- I. Warning: deliberate apostasy in response to heavenly blessing is irreversible (6:4–6)
 - A. Heavenly blessing (6:4–5)
 - B. Deliberate apostasy (6:6)
- II. Double-edged analogy: farmland’s future depends on its response to rainfall (6:7–8)
 - A. Farmland that, receiving rain, yields a useful crop enjoys God’s blessing (6:7)
 - B. Farmland that, receiving rain, yields worthless weeds deserves God’s curse (6:8)
- III. Reassurance: your response to spiritual privilege has been fruitful, giving hope of salvation—if you persevere in faith (6:9–12)
 - A. Concerning you, we are convinced of better things (than the curse just mentioned) (6:9)
 - B. God remembers your salvation-befitting behavior (6:10)
 - C. But show the same confident hope (as you did at first) to the end (6:11–12)

Comment

6:4–5 “Impossible” arrests our attention, abruptly opening a Greek sentence that runs for three verses. The author then builds suspense by withholding the detail of what, precisely, is “impossible” until the middle of verse 6: it is impossible, he finally says, “to restore . . . again to repentance” those who “have fallen away.” But before pronouncing a sober sentence on the spiritual treason from which there is no return, the author lists a series of God’s gracious gifts that compound the gravity of such apostasy. He switches from first- and second-person pronouns of interpersonal conversation (“we” and “you”; 5:11, 12; 6:1, 3) to descriptive third-person pronouns (“those who,” “they”) because he is not accusing his hearers of having passed the spiritual point of no return into curse and condemnation (6:8). Yet the privileges once enjoyed by apostates, the horrific evil of their fall away from trust in the Son of God, and their irremediable ruin are not irrelevant to the original audience in their immaturity, nor to anyone who needs stimulus to persevere to the end.

Four Greek participles—“having once been enlightened” (*hapax phōtisthentas*), “having tasted” (*geusamenous*), “having become” (*genēthentas*), and again “having tasted” (*geusamenous*)—introduce the spiritual privileges enjoyed by those who are members of the visible church. They were “once . . . enlightened” (6:4) when they heard God’s voice speaking good news (3:7; 4:2) of salvation through the apostles (2:3–4). In the work of Justin Martyr and later Fathers, “enlightenment” became a metaphor for baptism; but none of the uses of *phōtizō* in the NT refer explicitly to baptism (Luke 11:36; John 1:9; 1 Cor. 4:5; Eph. 1:18; 3:9; 2 Tim. 1:10; Rev. 18:1; 21:23; 22:5). Rather, those who are “enlightened” seem to be those who are exposed to God’s saving light through hearing the gospel proclaimed.

The other participial constructions focus on the primary means of grace, the apostolic word, and the Holy Spirit’s miraculous deeds that confirmed the apostles’ testimony. The pairing of the apostolic word and the Spirit’s confirmatory testimony is repeated twice, first in generalities and then more specifically:

- (A) *Having tasted* the heavenly gift
- (B) Having become partners/partakers of the *Holy Spirit*
- (A') *Having tasted* the goodness of the word of God
- (B') and the *powers/miracles* of the age to come

Although “the heavenly gift” could refer to the whole salvation that God bestows by grace, the repetition of “tasted” suggests that the gift coming down from heaven is specifically “the goodness of the word of God.” In Hebrews 12:25, God’s voice speaking to Israel *on earth* (at Sinai) will be contrasted to his addressing the new covenant church now *from heaven*. So the good word of God is a gift that now comes from heaven through Christ’s messengers.

Accompanying the apostles’ witness in words was God’s confirming testimony “by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2:4). The word *dynameis* (plural), translated “miracles” in 2:4, reappears here as “powers,”

and in both texts these miracles/powers are connected to the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:17–19; 4:29–31; 10:38). The link of the Spirit to miracles suggests that his public activity in the Christian community, not his secret regenerating work in human hearts, is in view. The Greek construction translated “have shared in the Holy Spirit” is literally “have become *metochoi* [companions] of the Holy Spirit.” The apostates had become the Holy Spirit’s companions, like the Messiah’s “companions” in Hebrews 1:9 and 3:14, as members of the Christian community, in which the Spirit attested the gospel through miracles. Perhaps they themselves performed such deeds of power despite their hearts’ alienation from God, as even Judas did (Matt. 10:1–8; cf. 7:21–23).

6:6 The ESV’s “and then have fallen away” rightly renders the final participle in the series of participles we looked at in the comment on 6:4–5. Some English versions read “if they fall away,” allowing for the interpretation that for people who had experienced the previous blessings, a fall into apostasy might be purely hypothetical, never actual. But the danger of willful apostasy, from which repentance is impossible, is real. It remains true that no one to whom Christ has given eternal life can be snatched out of his hand (John 10:29–30). But one can be a member of a new covenant congregation, hearing God’s word and seeing his Spirit’s works, yet nevertheless harden one’s heart against God’s voice, as some Israelites did (Heb. 3:1–4:13; cf. Acts 8:13, 18–24; 2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 4).

Our author, like pastors today, does not claim to look into others’ hearts but rather addresses his hearers in terms of their observable profession and behavior, recognizing that appearances may prove, in the end, to be deceiving. “Although the author addresses the community as a whole as believers, he hints at his own lack of omniscience—some may not be true believers even though by association they appear to be (3:6, 14; 4:1–2; 6:11).”¹⁴ The farmland analogy of verses 7–8 illustrates the distinction between externally experienced blessings and internal heart responses.

The gravity of such resolute rebellion, akin to Judas’s treachery, explains why it places the apostate’s heart beyond the possibility of repentance. God, who sovereignly grants repentance to rebels (Acts 3:26; 11:18), will not intervene (as he could) to turn around those who have willfully walked away. Such an apostate has identified himself with those who crucified the Son of God and treated him with contempt (Heb. 12:2–3; 13:13; cf. Matt. 27:39–44). Here and in 10:29 our author refers to Jesus as “the Son of God,” reminding us of his divine glory announced in the prologue (Heb. 1:1–4). His dignity underscores the horrific evil of renouncing allegiance to him and siding with his enemies.

6:7–8 This mini-parable of farmland and fields that yield different crops in response to heavenly rainfall draws on imagery from the OT and Jesus’ teaching. OT prophets compared God’s word and God’s Spirit to precipitation falling on parched earth,

14 George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 229.

making it fruitful (Isa. 44:3–4; 55:10–11). They indicted Israel as a vineyard that bore worthless fruit in response to God’s cultivation (Isa. 5:1–10; Jer. 2:21; Ezek. 19:10–14). Israel’s treason was “thorns and thistles,” like those that sprang from the cursed ground after Adam’s original sin (Hos. 10:1–8; cf. Gen. 3:17–18). Jesus’ parable of the sower categorized hearers in terms of their response to the word he was broadcasting, whether unresponsive, showing initial interest but fading because of persecution or distraction, or enduring and fruitful (Matt. 13:3–8, 18–23).

The grim threat of destruction by fire (Heb. 6:8; cf. Deut. 29:22–24) dramatizes the covenant curse awaiting apostates. Yet, just as the Lord set before Israel alternatives of blessings or curses, depending on their response to him (Deut. 11:13–17, 26–29; 28:4, 11–12, 16–18, 23–24), so God promises blessing to those who resemble ground that “produces a crop useful” to its cultivators (Heb. 6:7). Our author is confident his hearers (in general) fit this description.

6:9–10 With pastoral wisdom our author places alongside his terrifying pronouncement of curse on traitors a word of reassurance for his “beloved” hearers. His purpose is not to blunt the edge of the warning but to capitalize on the evidence of God’s prior work in them in order to stimulate their strenuous perseverance in faith. Our preacher is convinced that they are bearing useful fruit, befitting the better outcome of salvation (1:14; 2:10; 5:9). His confidence rests on the faithfulness of God, who will not mistreat his servants by forgetting or ignoring their labor and love for his name. Their love for God’s name—that is, for God in his self-revelation (2:12; 13:5)—has been “shown” (*endeiknymi*) in action, in their past and present service to the saints. Such service included their willing identification with those enduring reproach and affliction for their faith, including prisoners (10:32–34).

6:11–12 Having reassured the congregation as a whole of God’s knowledge of their labor and love, our preacher directs his final challenge to “each” individual member. Within a generally healthy congregation there may be someone harboring “an evil, unbelieving heart” (3:12), at risk of failing to reach God’s rest (4:1) and grace (12:12–15). Therefore our pastor expresses his strong desire that “each one of you” would “show” (*endeiknymi* again) in faithful conduct “the same earnestness” (*spoudē*, strenuous action) that had distinguished the beginning of their life in Christ, that each would endure all the way “until the end” (echoing 3:14). Such endurance is sustained not by self-reliant willpower but by the “full assurance of hope” drawn from “considering” and “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (3:1; 12:2).

The positive alternative to spiritual sloth (*nōthroi*, which opened this section; 5:11) is to become imitators of our forerunners in faith and patience, whose trust in God’s promises has been rewarded by the fulfillment of their hopes. Those exemplars of enduring trust include the congregation’s original leaders (13:7) and the “cloud of witnesses” throughout OT history, who took action in response to God’s word concerning things not yet seen (11:4–40). Our preacher will now

direct our attention to Abraham's long-suffering faith and to God's oath-bound promise (6:13–20).

Response

Our preacher states plainly the response we must make to the terrifying possibility of irreversible apostasy and the comforting evidence of God's heart-transforming, love-producing grace. Before new covenant Christians, no less than before ancient Israel, our covenant Lord has placed alternative outcomes of blessings and curses. These outcomes proceed from alternative responses to God's word and Spirit, which fall like refreshing rain onto our congregations. Both for ourselves and for each other, we must beware of the trajectory that begins with flaccid hearing and an infantile incapacity to "digest" God's word (5:11–6:3), that then proceeds to a deliberate repudiation of God's Son (6:4–6), and ends in a cursed and fiery destruction (6:8).

On the other hand, we should recall (and God never forgets) how he has turned our hearts toward himself and his saints in practical love demonstrated in service. Such hints of his grace in our past and present experience should steel our confident hope in his sure promises and spur our energies to run the marathon of faith to its completion. This terrifying portrait of irreversible apostasy is given not to tempt us to try to discover whether *someone else* has crossed a spiritual point of no return, nor to discourage our efforts to recover those who have wandered from Christ (Matt. 18:10–14). Rather, its purpose is to caution us to beware, for ourselves and each other, of any movement whatsoever toward that lethal precipice.

HEBREWS 6:13–20

¹³For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, ¹⁴saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." ¹⁵And thus Abraham,¹ having patiently waited, obtained the promise. ¹⁶For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. ¹⁷So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. ¹⁹We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, ²⁰where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

¹Greek *he*

Section Overview: The Guarantees of God's Sure Promise

Having urged his hearers to imitate “those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Heb. 6:12), our preacher now cites the experience of one of those imitation-worthy people of faith, Abraham. The preacher’s purpose is to persuade us that God can be trusted to keep his promises. In chapter 11 many more “witnesses” (12:1) will be summoned from OT history to testify to God’s faithfulness. In response to Abraham’s trusting and obedient readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac, God not only promised to bless Abraham but also secured that promise through an oath (Gen. 22:16–17). By that oath, God invoked himself (since no one is greater) to enforce his own commitment, imposing the death penalty (on himself!) in the event of any breach of promise. In this case such a breach was impossible because God cannot lie and cannot die.

Because believers in Jesus are the “offspring of Abraham” (Heb. 2:16), along with Abraham they are “heirs of the promise.” Moreover, now we have witnessed God’s fulfillment of a second oath, by which he installed Jesus as priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (5:6; 7:20–22, 28). So we rely on the twofold, unchangeable foundation by which God guaranteed his fidelity to his word (6:17–18). This exhortation section (5:11–6:20) closes with the resumption of a theme introduced in 5:6–10: Jesus’ priestly office “in the order of Melchizedek.” Elaboration of this priesthood, the central point of the book of Hebrews (cf. 8:1), was deferred at 5:11. But as he completes this exhortation, our preacher prepares to discuss in depth both Jesus’ superior qualifications to be priest (7:1–28) and the superior priestly ministry he conducts in “the inner place behind the curtain” (6:19; 8:1–10:31).

Section Outline

- I. God’s oath-bound promise to bless Abraham (6:13–16)
 - A. God invoked himself as witness and enforcer of his promise (6:13–14)
 - B. Abraham waited patiently and received the fulfillment of God’s promise (6:15)
 - C. Oaths invoke a greater power to enforce promises (6:16)
- II. God’s oath-bound promise to us, the heirs of the promise (6:17–20)
 - A. God secured his promise to us by adding his oath, guaranteeing his unchangeable word by his unchangeable life (6:17–18a)
 - B. God gives us strong encouragement to cling to the hope set before us (6:18b–20)
 - 1. This hope is our soul’s anchor, firm and reliable (6:18b–19a)
 - 2. This hope enters God’s heavenly sanctuary because Jesus our forerunner has entered as the high priest in the order of Melchizedek (6:19b–20)

Comment

6:13–14, 16 Repetition of the themes of *patient faith* (v. 15), *inheritance* (v. 17), and *promise* (vv. 13, 15, 17) indicates that this paragraph gives grounds for the exhorta-

tion to imitate those who have trusted in God's promises, even when fulfillment was long delayed (v. 12).

Abraham was the prototypical OT recipient of God's promises (7:6; 11:17). God promised to bless Abraham, to multiply his descendants, to grant him a homeland, and to make him a blessing to other peoples (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:5–7). The oath that God "swore by himself" came after Abraham sustained the testing of his faith, proving himself willing to sacrifice Isaac, the son through whom God had promised to multiply Abraham's descendants (Gen. 22:16–17).

God's oath, by which he committed himself to bless and multiply Abraham, now emerges as the main topic of this section of Hebrews. The OT describes God's securing his promises by swearing oaths (Ex. 13:5; 32:13; Deut. 1:8; Isa. 45:23; Jer. 22:5; 49:13; cf. Luke 1:73; Acts 2:30). Hebrews elsewhere discusses OT texts referring to two other divine oaths, one negative and the other positive. Negatively, Psalm 95:11 recounted the oath God swore at Kadesh that the unbelieving generation of Israelites would not enter his rest (Heb. 3:11, 18; 4:3; cf. Num. 14:21–23). Positively, the Lord has sworn that the king enthroned at his right hand is priest forever in the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:1, 4), an irreversible commitment establishing the permanence of Jesus' tenure as high priest (Heb. 7:20–22, 28).

In antiquity, an oath was an appeal to "something greater" (6:16)—often a deity—to witness the veracity of a statement or the commitment expressed in a promise, and to impose punishment if the witness perjured himself or if the promise maker failed to follow through. "In the Graeco-Roman world oaths were sworn in the name of God, a king, the genius of the emperor, or the emperor himself. Those who took oaths made themselves liable to the judgment of God or the emperor if they proved false to such a commitment."¹⁵ To take an oath was to seal one's word with one's very life. Likewise, in covenant ratification ceremonies, slain animals symbolized the cursed death that would ensue if one party violated the covenant (Gen. 15:9–21; Ex. 24:3–8; Jer. 34:15–20; cf. comments on Heb. 9:15; 9:16–17; 9:18–20).

Israel was to swear oaths in the Lord's name only, revering his omniscient perception, justice, and power to enforce fidelity to commitments made (Deut. 5:11; 6:13; 10:20; cf. Gen. 31:50; 1 Sam. 20:12). Likewise, Paul invoked God as witness to the truth of his statements (Rom. 1:9; 9:1; Phil. 1:8). An oath invoked the Lord himself to function as a third party—both witness and enforcer—to a legal transaction, certifying the human parties' obligations and therefore ending their dispute with each other.¹⁶ Our preacher again builds his argument from lesser to greater: if human oaths, witnessed and enforced by a superior power, are so reliable that they end disputes, how much more can we trust God's oath-bound

¹⁵ O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 237, citing C. R. Koester, *Hebrews* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 326.

¹⁶ In verse 17 "guaranteed" reflects the Greek verb *mesiteuō*, "mediate," perhaps reflecting Exodus 22:10–12, which states that if one's animal died while in the custody of a neighbor, "an oath by the Lord shall be between them both [LXX: *ana meson amphoterōn*] to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbor's property."

promise, which he swore “by himself”! There is no greater person to witness and enforce his commitment.

6:15 Because Abraham patiently waited, he “obtained the promise” of God’s blessing and multiplied descendants. Abraham did not merely hear God’s words of promise but actually obtained the fulfillment of God’s promise—“through faith and patience” he was among those who “inherit the promises” (6:12). Likewise, many OT believers “obtained promises” (11:33). Yet Hebrews also states that Abraham and other patriarchs “died in faith, *not having received* the things promised” (11:13) and that OT believers in general “*did not receive* what was promised” (11:39). In what sense did Abraham *obtain*, yet not *receive*, what God was promising? Abraham waited a hundred years for the conception, from parents “as good as dead,” of the son through whom his “offspring [shall] be named” (11:18; Gen. 21:12). Years later, when on Mount Moriah the Lord provided a ram to die instead of Isaac (Gen. 22:1–19), Abraham “figuratively speaking” received his only son of promise back from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Isaac’s twofold “resurrection,” in conception and again on Mount Moriah, began the fulfillment of God’s promise to multiply Abraham’s descendants to countless numbers.

6:17–18 God’s oath-bound promise to Abraham was not for Abraham alone. It was to reassure all “the heirs of the promise,” including first-century Hebrew Christians, so that “*we* who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement.” In fact, the divine oath that secured blessing for Abraham was contingent on the oath God would swear in order to install Christ as the permanent priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:20–22, 28; Ps. 110:4). The concepts of heirship and inheritance, which entail *assured but future ownership*, appear throughout Hebrews. Christ is the heir of all things (1:2). Angels serve those who will inherit salvation (1:14; cf. 9:15). Noah was an heir of righteousness (11:7), and Abraham would be heir of a land through his offspring (11:8–9).

God intended to “show”—to provide legal evidence demonstrating (*epideiknymi*; cf. Acts 18:28)—that his purpose to bless is unchangeable and irrevocable. Therefore he added his oath to his promise. Thus “two unchangeable things” would banish any doubt as to God’s reliability. The first unchangeable thing is the oath God swore to Abraham (Gen. 22:16–17), vowing to impose on himself the penalty of death should he fail to keep his word. But “it is impossible for God to lie”—a theme that pervades the Bible (cf. Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Isa. 46:10–11; Titus 1:2). And it is impossible for God to die, since he is “the living God” (Heb. 3:12; 9:14; 10:31; 12:22). So his oath to Abraham is unchangeable. Yet, just as Hebrews often shows God’s new covenant provision improving upon the old (1:1–2; 3:2–6; 4:14–5:10; 7:15–28; 9:13–14; etc.), so here a second, better oath is brought into view, the oath spoken by God in Psalm 110:4 appointing Christ as “priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” The content of that oath was quoted in Hebrews 5:6, and the oath-formula and its implications will appear in 7:20–22. Because Christ lives forever and holds priestly office forever—by inviolable divine oath,

not mere command (7:16, 28)—Abraham and we, his new covenant children of faith, have two oaths on which to rest our confidence.¹⁷ These mutually confirming evidences provide “strong encouragement” to us who, though we are “heirs of the promise,” are also exiles who have “fled for refuge” to God’s protection in a hostile world. “Encouragement” or “exhortation” (*paraklēsis*) characterizes the entire sermon-letter of Hebrews (13:22; cf. 3:13; 10:25; 12:5; 13:19).

6:19–20 The “hope set before us” (v. 18) resembles a ship’s “anchor,” which stabilizes the ship during storms so that it does not “drift away” (2:1) and crash on rocks. The author strikingly adapts the metaphor: whereas ships’ anchors *descend* deep to the seabed, Christians’ hope *ascends* deep into heaven, behind the second veil separating the holy outer chamber from the inner Most Holy Place (9:3; 10:20; Lev. 16:2, 12–17). The object of our hope may seem far off in a distant future, but it already exists and we are secured to it “as if it were a grappling hook to which the souls of believers were connected”¹⁸ through our bond with Jesus.

Jesus’ entrance into the inner chamber behind the veil “as a forerunner on our behalf” conveys two assurance-building truths: First, his entrance “on our behalf” refers to his role as our representative in the presence of God his Father, who intercedes for our forgiveness on the basis of Christ’s sacrificial death (Heb. 9:13–14; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2). Second, his title “forerunner,” possibly an athletic analogy (cf. Heb. 12:1–2), implies that believers will follow him into that privileged place of intimate communion with God (10:19–22). As the discussion returns to the theme of Jesus’ priestly office “in the order of Melchizedek,” deferred after 5:10 but now to be resumed in 7:1–28, the author reverses the wording of Psalm 110:4 that was cited in 5:6 (visible in Greek):

(5:6) You are priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.

(6:20) after the order of Melchizedek,
a high priest having become forever.

The inversion of word order emphasizes that Jesus, the High Priest in Melchizedek’s line, holds office and conducts his ministry *forever*. The eternal duration of Jesus’ priesthood brings assurance to all who approach God through him (7:16–17, 21–25, 28).

Response

The Hebrew Christians who first heard this sermon rightly looked to Abraham as the source of their covenantal connection with the living God, but Scripture shows that believers in Christ *from every race and nationality* are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29). Thus the double substantiation that God gave

¹⁷ Christopher Colquitt, “Two Unchangeable Oaths: Hebrews 6:13–20” (unpublished paper, Westminster Seminary California, 2017).

¹⁸ Johnson, *Hebrews*, 173.

to our father Abraham—the impeccable truthfulness of the God who cannot lie and the solemn oath of the God who cannot die—speaks strong encouragement to all the “heirs of the promise,” whatever their ethnicity, who have fled for refuge to Jesus Christ. When threats alarm our hearts or misgivings unsettle our minds—that is when we must refocus our eyes on Jesus, standing as our High Priest in heaven’s Most Holy Place:

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end to all my sin. . . .

My life is hid with Christ on high,
With Christ my Savior and my God.¹⁹

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 7:1–28

In 6:20 our author returned to the wording of Psalm 110:4, “priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,” ready at last to explore this theme he had previously deferred (Heb. 5:6, 10–11). The two OT passages in which Melchizedek appears, Genesis 14:17–20 and Psalm 110:4, are enlisted to demonstrate that this priestly order is superior to that of Israel’s priestly tribe, the Levites, and the priestly family of Aaron and his descendants. First, the Genesis account of the meeting between Melchizedek and the patriarch Abraham is shown to forecast the eventual appearance of one whose qualification for priestly office does not depend on genealogy and whose mediatorial status surpasses that of Abraham, Levi, Aaron, and their descendants (Heb. 7:1–10). These points of contrast are then elaborated from Psalm 110:4, which adds God’s unchangeable oath as further securing the eternal tenure of the final priest (Heb. 7:11–28).

¹⁹ Charitie L. Bancroft, “Before the Throne of God Above” (1863).

HEBREWS 7:1–10

7 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ²and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. ³He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.

⁴See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! ⁵And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers,¹ though these also are descended from Abraham. ⁶But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. ⁷It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. ⁸In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. ⁹One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, ¹⁰for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*

Section Overview: Melchizedek Greater Than Abraham and Levi

After defeating an alliance of four kings, Abraham encountered the king of Salem, Melchizedek, “priest of the Most High God” (cf. Gen. 14:17–20). Our author calls attention to the features by which Genesis introduces Melchizedek—his name and official position (king of Salem)—and the OT text’s silence concerning his ancestry, birth, or death. These elements show that the reference to Melchizedek in Psalm 110:4 accords with his previous appearance in Scripture, and they also support the argument that both OT texts are fulfilled in Jesus, the priest-king who lives and ministers forever.

Abraham recognized Melchizedek as a worshiper of the Most High God and a priestly mediator between himself and his divine Lord, who had called him out of Mesopotamia. Abraham gave Melchizedek a tenth of the plunder he had seized as a tribute offered to God, who had given Abraham victory in battle. By entrusting the Lord’s tithe to this priest, Abraham acknowledged Melchizedek’s role as an intermediary between himself and the Most High God. Melchizedek responded by pronouncing blessing on Abraham in the name of the Most High God. This action likewise confirmed Melchizedek’s privilege to intervene between Abraham

and God. Moreover, the biblical principle of covenantal representation, in which later generations are reckoned to have participated in their ancestors' actions, means Abraham's great-grandson Levi, whose descendants would eventually attend Israel's tabernacle and temple, had already acknowledged Melchizedek's mediatorial superiority through the exchange between Abraham and Melchizedek.

Section Outline

- I. God's word makes Melchizedek like God's Son (7:1–3)
 - A. Melchizedek was Abraham's priest (7:1–2a)
 1. When they met, Melchizedek blessed Abraham (7:1)
 2. Abraham gave Melchizedek God's tithe (7:2a)
 - B. Melchizedek was a righteous king (7:2b)
 - C. Melchizedek reflected God's eternal Son, so his priesthood was neither based on birth nor ended by death (7:3)
- II. Melchizedek was priest both for Abraham and for Levi, ancestor of Israel's priests (7:4–10)
 - A. Melchizedek was Abraham's priest (7:4–7)
 1. Abraham gave Melchizedek God's tithe (7:4–5)
 2. The exchange of tithe and blessing shows that the priest installed without genealogy (Melchizedek) intervened between Abraham and God (7:6)
 3. Melchizedek pronounced God's blessing on Abraham (7:7)
 - B. Melchizedek was Levi's priest (7:8–10)
 1. Levitical priests die, but the priest like Melchizedek lives on and on (7:8)
 2. Through his ancestor Abraham, Levi, who receives tithes from Israel, gave God's tithe to Melchizedek (7:9–10)

Comment

7:1–2 In Genesis the encounter of Abraham and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18–20) is surrounded by the patriarch's interaction with the king of Sodom (Gen. 14:17, 21–24). Abraham's nephew Lot had moved into Sodom, exposing his family to both physical and spiritual danger (Gen. 13:13; 14:8–12; 18:20–19:29; 2 Pet. 2:6–8). After Abraham defeated Sodom's enemies, its monarch met the patriarch and offered him Sodom's wealth as the victor's spoils (Gen. 14:17, 21). But Abraham declined, having sworn before "the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth," to accept no reward from Sodom (Gen. 14:22–24). Such a transaction would have entangled Abraham in a covenantal alliance with that notoriously evil metropolis, which was rushing unwittingly toward destruction.

By contrast, Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, "king of Salem, priest of the Most High God" (Heb. 7:1, echoing Gen. 14:18), displayed their shared devotion to the true creator and possessor of the universe, whom both knew as "God Most High" and whom Abraham called by his covenant name, "LORD." Melchizedek

pronounced God's blessing on Abraham, and Abraham apportioned "a tenth part," the Lord's tithe, of the spoils he had recaptured in battle (cf. Gen. 28:22; Lev. 27:30–32; Num. 18:21–32). The significance of these two actions, demonstrating Melchizedek's priestly, mediatorial superiority to the great patriarch Abraham, will be elaborated on in verses 4–10 of Hebrews 7.

Melchizedek's name and political position in the ancient Near East attest that he was a king. As our author notes, his name in Hebrew means "king [*melek*; in compound words, *melki*-] of righteousness [*tsedeq*]." His name thus brings to mind Hebrews 1:8–9, which applies Psalm 45:6–7 to the Son: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. . . . You have loved righteousness . . . therefore God, your God, has anointed you."

Melchizedek's political position was "king of Salem," meaning "king of peace" (Hb. *shalem* = Gk. *eirēnē*). The parallelism of "Salem" and "Zion" in Psalm 76:2 indicates that Salem was an older name for Jerusalem, which would become David's capital and the site of the temple. Although "peace" (*eirēnē*) appears rarely in Hebrews (11:31; 12:14; 13:20), it expresses the result of the atoning sacrifice that priests offer, namely, a relationship of communion between guilty people and the holy God (cf. Rom. 5:1–11; Eph. 2:14–18). Psalm 110:4 emphasizes that Melchizedek is the pattern for a *priestly* order, but one distinctive of this order is its confluence with *kingship*.

7:3 In Greek, three negated adjectives—"fatherless, motherless, genealogy-less"—appear abruptly without conjunctions and are followed by a participial phrase containing more negations: "having *neither* beginning of days *nor* end of life." Melchizedek is set apart from ordinary human experience by these five missing pieces—father, mother, family tree, birth, and death. Some have understood this description as teaching that the priest-king who met Abraham was a supernatural manifestation of God in human form (theophany)—specifically, an appearance of God the Son in human history before his incarnation (Christophany). However, it is more probable that our preacher does not view Melchizedek as a Christophany. Rather, he treats the *silences* of Genesis 14—facts about the historical Melchizedek that Moses omitted from the narrative of his encounter with Abraham—as intended by the Holy Spirit, Scripture's divine author, to *portray* that ancient priest-king as "*resembling* [*aphomoioō*] the Son of God." Melchizedek is *like* God's Son, but he is also *distinct from* him.

The same relationship (similarity with distinction) is expressed in Hebrews 7:15, where the resemblance is traced in the opposite direction, with Jesus being described as "another priest . . . *in the likeness of* [*kata tēn homoiotēta*] Melchizedek." This interpretation is consistent with the timeline in Hebrews of Jesus' priestly career: God's Son assumed human nature like ours, was obedient under temptation and suffering, offered his life as a sacrifice, and consequently *became* (2:17; 6:20) and *was designated* (5:10) High Priest "after the order of Melchizedek." It also fits the natural reading of the Genesis account, which presents Melchizedek as holding an established political

position as king of Salem, unlike theophany accounts in which God's appearances are brief and extraordinary (Gen. 18:1–33; 32:22–32; Ex. 3:1–4:17; Josh. 5:13–15).

What Genesis does *not* tell us about Melchizedek makes him exceptional in Genesis, a book structured by *genealogies* in which *births* and *deaths*, *fathers* and (among the patriarchs) even *mothers* are listed (Gen. 5:1–32; 6:9–10; 10:1–32; 11:10–32; 16:15; 21:1–7; 23:1–2; 25:7–26; 29:31–30:24; 35:16–36:43; 49:33; 50:22–26). To have one's name embedded in these genealogies is to have a place in the covenantal history of Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12:1–2; 15:5; 17:1–8; 22:15–18). Yet Melchizedek, though a worshiper of the same “Most High God” who called Abraham to himself, appears and disappears suddenly in Abraham's story, altogether lacking genetic “credentials” or generational context.

7:4–5 The actions of Melchizedek and Abraham—blessing and tithing, respectively—show “how great this man was.” Even Israel's “patriarch” (this honorific title appears only here in Hebrews) gave Melchizedek a tenth of the plunder, thereby acknowledging Salem's priest-king as his intermediary to God.

The Levites “are descended from” Abraham—literally they “have come out of [his] loins” (*exelēlythotas ek tēs osphyos*), anticipating verse 10. Levi's descendants were set apart by the law's command stipulating that the Israelites were to donate the Lord's tithes to them. Their calling to serve God's sanctuary (first tabernacle, then temple) meant that, instead of farmland, the Levites received *the Lord* as their inheritance, and the rest of Israel was to provide for them as they served on Israel's behalf in God's presence (Num. 18:20–24; Deut. 18:1–2).

7:6–7 In the exchange of tithe and blessing, both Abraham and Melchizedek acknowledged Melchizedek's privileged position as priestly mediator between the patriarch and his divine Lord. Tithes offered in worship were tokens of the worshipers' awareness that God is the source of all they possessed. To entrust the Lord's tithe to a priest was to recognize the priest's authority to intercede with God on one's behalf. The tithe went from worshipers *through the priest* to God. A blessing pronounced in God's name enacted the priest's authority to confer God's grace on worshipers. Blessing thus proceeded from God *through the priest* to the worshipers.

Melchizedek is described as “this man who does not have his descent from them” (v. 6), since he was “without . . . genealogy” (v. 3). Abraham, on the other hand, is the one “who had the promises” (v. 6). These descriptions emphasize, first, that the priestly credentials qualifying a priest according to Melchizedek's order differ from those qualifying Levitical priests; and, second, that Abraham's ultimate blessedness as a recipient of God's promises (6:12, 15; 11:8–11, 13, 17) is mediated by a Melchizedek-like priest.

7:8 A twofold contrast between Levitical priests and Melchizedek (actually, the priest of whom Melchizedek was a preview) anticipates the inferences that will be drawn from Psalm 110:4 (Heb. 7:23–24). First, the Levites were many “men,” whereas Melchizedek was singular, “one of whom it is testified.” Second, their

plurality was needed because they were “mortal men.” Actually, the Greek is more vivid: “dying men” (*apothnēskontes anthrōpoi*). On the other hand, the silence of the Genesis text concerning Melchizedek’s “beginning of days [or] end of life” (7:3) can be construed as Scripture’s testimony (*martyroumenos*) that “he lives.”

This inference is reinforced by the other OT Melchizedek text, Psalm 110:4, in which “it is witnessed [*martyreitai*] of him” that he is priest forever (Heb. 7:17). Thus Moses’ Holy Spirit–directed authorial restraint portrayed the ancient priest-king Melchizedek in such a way that he “[resembles] the Son of God” (7:3), the priest who “always lives to make intercession for” those who approach God through him (7:25). Someone might object that the fact that Melchizedek’s death is not recorded in Genesis does not *in itself* testify to his endless life. But our preacher is already interpreting this feature of Genesis 14 in light of Psalm 110:4 and the fulfillment of both OT texts in Jesus, the risen High Priest who lives and serves forever (Heb. 13:20).

7:9–10 One further conclusion is drawn about the relationship between Melchizedek’s priesthood and that of Israel’s priests, descended from Levi. The principle of covenantal representation means that descendants are considered to have participated in their ancestors’ actions, for good or ill. Abraham’s offspring would be multiplied and blessed because Abraham believed God (Gen. 15:5–6; 17:1–8). On the other hand, Adam, father of the human race, disobeyed God’s prohibition in Eden, and by that one sin his offspring in all succeeding generations are reckoned to be sinners, liable to death (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). Likewise, since Levi, Abraham’s great-grandson, “was still in the loins [*en tē osphyn*] of his ancestor,” our author concludes that the Levitical-Aaronic priests, whose ministry was supported by tithes from Israel’s other tribes, were already acknowledging that Melchizedek’s priesthood was superior to their own because through Abraham they offered tithes to Melchizedek, the superior priest.

Response

Our preacher is only partway through his argument that the OT foretells the coming of a high priest whose mediatorial ministry is better than Levi’s and Aaron’s. He has shown from Genesis 14:17–20 that the narrative of Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek, king of ancient Salem and priest of God Most High, contains hints that Israel’s great patriarch of faith acknowledged a superior mediator by offering to him the Lord’s tithe and humbly receiving from him the Lord’s blessing. Even before the argument is reinforced from Psalm 110:4, the meeting of Melchizedek with Abraham shows how we should respond:

- (1) We honor God as the giver of all of our possessions and enabler of all of our successes when we return, as his tribute, some of his gifts to provide for those who bless us in his name (1 Cor. 9:1–14; Gal. 6:6–8).
- (2) Since the patriarch Abraham, our exemplar of faith (Heb. 6:12–15; 7:4), received God’s blessing through a priest greater than his offspring Levi

and Aaron, we too need a superior priest—one who is king of righteousness and peace—to bless us with righteousness and peace. This greater priest-king, Jesus, has arrived at last. Having died once for all to atone for our sins, he has risen from the dead and lives forever to intercede for us. So we may—and must—“draw near to God through him” in prayer and worship (7:25).

HEBREWS 7:11–28

¹¹Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? ¹²For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. ¹³For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. ¹⁴For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

¹⁵This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷For it is witnessed of him,

“You are a priest forever,
after the order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁸For on the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹(for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God.

²⁰And it was not without an oath. For those who formerly became priests were made such without an oath, ²¹but this one was made a priest with an oath by the one who said to him:

“The Lord has sworn
and will not change his mind,
‘You are a priest forever.’”

²²This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant.

²³The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, ²⁴but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. ²⁵Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost¹ those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. ²⁷He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. ²⁸For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

¹That is, completely; or *at all times*

Section Overview: A Priest Forever

Psalm 110:4 draws out the implications of the Genesis narrative about Melchizedek, who blessed the patriarch Abraham, interpreting that ancient king-priest as a pattern for a better order of priesthood than that of Levi's descendants. The psalm's mention of this Melchizedek-like priestly order implies that the Levitical order could not achieve "perfection"—complete cleansing from defilement, enabling worshipers to draw near to God (Heb. 7:11, 18–19).

Two features in Psalm 110:4 show that the Melchizedek-like priest is superior to Levi and his offspring: (1) The Melchizedek-like priest ministers "forever," having been appointed not because of genealogical descent from Levi but "by the power of *an indestructible life*" (Heb. 7:11–19). This claim is established through a closely reasoned argument, in which the conjunction "for" (*gar*) links propositions in a chain, each statement supporting what precedes it (vv. 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 19). (2) The appointment of the Melchizedek-like priest, unlike that of the Levitical priests, is secured by *God's unchangeable oath* (7:20–22). Because the Melchizedek-like high priest lives forever, he prays perpetually for "those who draw near to God through him" (7:25). His flawless purity qualified him to offer himself as their once-for-all atoning sacrifice (7:23–28).

Section Outline

- I. The Levitical priests and the law of genealogical descent that qualified them could not perfect worshipers to approach God, so Psalm 110:4 announced a better priest, qualified by his indestructible life (Heb. 7:11–19)
 - A. Scripture's promise of another priest in a different order (Ps. 110:4) implies that the Levitical priesthood could not bring perfection (Heb. 7:11)
 - B. The replacement of Levitical priests by a priest like Melchizedek requires a change from the law of genealogical descent (7:12–14)
 - C. The Melchizedek-like priest holds office by the power of his indestructible life (7:15–17)
 - D. The Levitical law of genealogical descent was weak, perfecting nothing; but the ever-living priest like Melchizedek brings us near to God (7:18–19)

- II. God's inviolable oath permanently installed the priest like Melchizedek, so he can bring us near to God (7:20–25)
 - A. Unlike Levitical priests, the Melchizedek-like priest was appointed by God's inviolable oath (7:20–22)
 - B. Unlike Levitical priests, the Melchizedek-like priest continues forever, interceding ceaselessly for those who approach God through him (7:23–25)
- III. The High Priest who fits our need is utterly holy, not needing atonement for his own sins but sacrificing himself to atone for others' sins (7:26–27)
- IV. Summation: the law appoints weak (sinful and mortal) high priests, but the oath that succeeds it appoints a Son who serves forever (7:28)

Comment

7:11–12 For the second time (cf. Heb. 4:6–8) our preacher argues that an OT passage implies that, when that ancient Scripture was given, the situation for God's people was less than complete. If Israel's situation had left nothing to be desired, Hebrews reasons, God would not have spoken as he did, raising anticipation of a better provision to come. Here the author reasons, "If perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood," Psalm 110:4 would not say what it does. If Aaronic priests could have brought "perfection" to worshipers, no need would have existed for "another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek," rather than in the order of Aaron. (This line of argument will be used again in Heb. 8:7–12 to show that the promise of a new covenant in Jer. 31:31–34 implied a grave defect in the people of the "old" covenant made at Sinai.)

We have seen "perfection" to be a prominent idea in Hebrews (2:10; 5:8–10; 7:19, 28; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:23). In general, "perfection" (*teleiōsis*, *teleioō*) describes completeness. In Hebrews, however, "perfection" often carries a special connotation it acquired through usage in the LXX to refer to priestly consecration (Ex. 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev. 4:5; 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num. 3:3; etc.). As priests needed to be "perfected" to enter God's sanctuary and intercede on others' behalf, so ordinary worshipers needed to be "perfected"—that is, cleansed—in order to draw near to God. So in Hebrews "perfection" often means "unimpeded access to God and unbroken communion with him."²⁰

It is in this sense that "perfection" could not be attained through the Levitical priesthood associated with the law. Verse 19 confirms that our author has this sort of "perfection" in view. There he reasserts (forming an *inclusio* with v. 11) the law's inability to "perfect" anything, contrasting its impotence with the better hope introduced by Christ, "through which *we draw near to God*." The law's sacrifices cannot "perfect" worshipers' consciences, but Christ's blood can (9:9, 14; 10:14), so in him we may draw near (10:19–22).

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 80.

Verse 12 explains the parenthetical comment in verse 11 that “under” or “on the basis of” the Levitical priesthood (*epi autēs*, with “priesthood” as the antecedent), “the people received the law.” In other words, the Levitical priesthood was the foundation on which the law of Moses rested. When the priesthood changes, the law must change as well. The cause-and-effect order is significant: it is not that a change in the law necessitates a change in the priesthood, but vice versa. Here the specific “law” is the genealogical requirement that high priests be descendants of Levi and Aaron. When the king-priest promised in Psalm 110 appears, the genealogical method of appointing priests must be replaced. The “legal requirement concerning bodily descent” gives way to the “indestructible life” and divine oath constituting the credentials of the priestly order of Melchizedek (Heb. 7:16–17, 20–21). As subsequent discussion will show, the arrival of the Melchizedek-like high priest has also produced other changes to the law delivered at Sinai: changes in sanctuary (8:2–6; 9:11–12, 24; 10:19–22), sacrifice (9:13–14, 25–26; 10:1–14; 13:15–16), sanctions (10:26–31), and more.

7:13–14 God alone has the right to appoint high priests to enter his presence on others’ behalf (5:4–6). From the giving of the law through Moses, the Lord had designated his high priest in each successive generation through genealogy. Within the tribe of Levi, set apart from other tribes to serve God’s sanctuary, the Lord appointed Aaron as high priest and his sons as priests along with him (Ex. 28:1–2; Num. 3:1–13). His oldest surviving son would succeed him as high priest (Num. 20:23–29). The budding of Aaron’s staff in the aftermath of Korah’s rebellion was the Lord’s reaffirmation that he himself had chosen Aaron’s family to serve at his altar (Num. 16:1–18:7; cf. Heb. 9:4).

Our preacher is well aware that Israel’s system of priestly appointment based on genealogy would disqualify Jesus, since “it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah,” about which “Moses said nothing about priests” (7:14), and “from which no one has ever served at the altar” (7:13) in the earthly sanctuary (which is “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things”; 8:4–5). But Psalm 110:4 is God’s declaration that the genealogical principle legitimating Aaron’s priesthood has been rendered obsolete, replaced by the inauguration of a superior priest, qualified by even better credentials.

7:15–17 Addressing the priest after the order of Melchizedek, God “witnessed” (*martyreō*; cf. “testified” in v. 8) that this priest had become and would remain priest “forever” (v. 17). Thus God announced a different criterion of priestly selection, set point for point against the principle of genealogical link to Levi (cf. v. 16, in Greek word order; table 1.2).

TABLE 1.2: Hebrews 7:16 in Greek Word Order: A Different Criterion of Priestly Selection

<i>not</i>	<i>according to</i>	<i>a law</i>	<i>of a commandment</i>	<i>fleshly</i>	(Levi)
<i>but</i>	<i>according to</i>	<i>a power</i>	<i>of a life</i>	<i>indestructible</i>	(Melchizedek)

The “fleshly commandment” (“requirement concerning bodily descent”; ESV) authorizing Aaron’s sons to be priests had to do with physical genetics, but it was also “fleshly” in the sense of being weak and vulnerable to death (7:18, 23, 28). By contrast, the priestly credential of the Melchizedek-like priest announced in Psalm 110:4 is the *power* of a *life* utterly impervious to destruction. Our High Priest experienced both weakness and death “in the days of his flesh,” and these shared sufferings qualified him to be our compassionate High Priest (Heb. 2:14–18; 4:15; 5:2, 7). Now, however, since Christ has arisen (in the sense both of “coming on the scene” and of “rising from the dead”²¹), his indestructible life (as well as God’s unchangeable oath; 7:20–22) secures his eternal tenure as priest, to pray perpetually for others (7:24–25).

7:18–19 In the immediate context the “former commandment” (*proagousēs entolēs*) is the “legal requirement” (*nomon entolēs*; v. 16) stipulating Aaronic genealogy as the criterion of priestly appointment. That commandment’s being “set aside” (*athetēsis* = “annulment” or “removal”) makes way for the introduction of a better hope imparting access to God. But the setting aside of that specific regulation is symptomatic of a far-reaching removal of the covenantal system mediated through Moses (8:8–13), including its sanctuary, its sacrificial rituals, and its sanctions for breach of covenant (9:1–10:18, 26–31).

The genealogical criterion sanctioning Aaron and his descendants was “weak” because it presupposed the succession of deaths, generation by generation, that prevented those high priests from ministering in perpetuity (7:23, 28). This law was “useless” because priests descended from Aaron and the sacrifices they offered could not “perfect” anything (restating the point of verse 11: “perfection” was not attainable through the Levitical priests). The blood of slain animals did have a ritual function, to “sanctify for the purification of the flesh,” thus removing ceremonial defilement (9:13), but they could not “perfect the conscience of the worshiper” (9:9). The cleansing of worshipers’ consciences so that they could “draw near to God” (7:19) would be achieved only by the blood of Christ, offered “once for all” to secure complete atonement, eternal redemption, and unimpeded access to God’s presence (9:12, 14).

The “better hope” introduced by the arising of the “forever” (7:17) priest imparts confidence of God’s welcome as we “draw near” through Jesus. This is the “hope set before us” (6:18) that has entered into the “inner place,” God’s true sanctuary in heaven, where Jesus is conducting his high priestly ministry on our behalf (6:18–20; cf. 7:26; 8:1–2; 9:11–12, 24).

7:20–21 Psalm 110:4 has already appeared repeatedly in this sermon (Heb. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 15, 17), but now for the first time the preamble is quoted, which

²¹ In Hebrews 7:11, 15 the verb *anistēmi* (“arise, stand up”) may mean that the priest like Melchizedek has appeared in history (as in Acts 5:36–37). But typically in the NT *anistēmi* refers to resurrection from the dead (Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; Luke 9:8; 16:31; 24:7; John 11:33–34; Acts 9:40; 10:41; 17:3; Eph. 5:14; 1 Thess. 4:14, 16). This association with resurrection fits the emphasis here on Christ’s indestructible life. See R. H. Gundry, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 889–890.

asserts the unchangeable “oath” by which God secured his declaration to the priest in Melchizedek’s order: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind.” The permanence of this priest’s tenure is secured not only by his indestructible life (7:16) but also by the oath God has sworn, invoking himself as witness and enforcer of his commitment. Earlier we considered the unchangeable oath, secured by his unchangeable life, by which God guaranteed his promise to Abraham. That oath-bound promise was not only for Abraham’s benefit. To all who flee for refuge to Abraham’s covenant-keeping God, that oath gives “strong encouragement to hold fast” in persevering faith (Heb. 6:17–18). Now Psalm 110:4 shows us an even more foundational oath, hinted at in 6:17–18, on which God’s oath to Abraham and all believers rests. Believers like Abraham have every reason to rely on God’s promise of blessing because God has installed as their intercessory high priest his “Son who has been made perfect forever” (Heb. 7:28). God has sworn to this Son that his priestly ministry will never end (v. 24).

7:22 Because God’s oath has secured the eternal permanence of Jesus’ priesthood, Jesus has become the “guarantor of a better covenant.” Thus our author anticipates the covenant motif, soon to be explored in an extended interpretation of Jeremiah 31:31–34, quoted at that discussion’s beginning (Heb. 8:8–12) and end (10:15–18). “Covenant” appears more often in Hebrews (17x) than in the rest of the NT combined (16x). The covenant concept structures the book’s understanding of redemptive history and sets the context for this sermon’s interpretation of the OT sanctuary and its sacrifices and the superiority of Christ’s priestly ministry. The “new covenant” that God promised through Jeremiah is “better” than that inaugurated through Moses because the new covenant “is enacted on better promises” (8:6), including the prospect of intimate access to God for all God’s people, “from the least of them to the greatest,” and the complete, once-for-all forgiveness of sins (8:11–12).

In this first appearance of “covenant,” Jesus’ role is characterized as that of the covenant’s “guarantor” (*engyos*). Neither this term nor its cognates appear elsewhere in the NT. In the LXX this word group describes a third party who accepts responsibility to secure another person’s contractual or covenantal commitment, even at risk to his own property or life (Prov. 6:1; 17:18; 22:26). Later Christ will be described as “mediator” (*mesitēs*) of the new covenant (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). But Moses also was a covenant mediator (Gal. 3:19–20), and his experience sadly showed that a mere mediator of even so solemn a bond as a divine-human covenant could not *guarantee* that both parties would fulfill their commitments (Heb. 8:7–9). Jesus is the new covenant’s mediator, but he is more: through his perpetual priesthood, secured by God’s oath, he *guarantees* that the new covenant’s blessings will reach their intended recipients.

7:23–25 In case any of his hearers assume that the Levitical priests were better because they were more in number than the solitary priest addressed in Psalm 110:4, our preacher argues that the truth is just the opposite of that assumption. One sober reality explains why both the principle of genealogy and a plurality of

priests were needed to sustain the order of Aaron: “They were prevented by *death* from continuing in office.” Every time a high priest died, his successor had to be identified by genealogy (Num. 20:28; 33:38; Deut. 10:6; 32:50; Josh. 24:33; cf. Num. 35:25). The order of Melchizedek, on the other hand, now belongs to a single priest, for God swore to make him priest “forever.” He “continues forever” because his life cannot be destroyed (cf. Heb. 7:16). The observation that this priest “continues” (*menō*) in office echoes 7:3, which in turn recalls the quotation of Psalm 102:25–27 in Hebrews 1:10–12: heavens and earth “perish, but you remain [*diamenō*].” The tenure of this eternally abiding divine and messianic Son in his priestly office is permanent.

The principle of plurality characterizing the OT order revealed its imperfection and incompleteness, whereas the *singularity* of Christ’s authority and ministry demonstrates that God’s full and final provision for his people’s needs has arrived. In the past God spoke through prophets “at many times and in many ways” (Heb. 1:1), but the plural installments and media of his self-revelation meant that his last, best word had not yet been spoken. Now, “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,” whose divine glory (1:2–3) and saving message (2:3) have brought God’s special revelation to climax and completion. Likewise, the ceaseless repetition of animal sacrifices in the OT sanctuary (10:1–4, 11) showed that none of them was the final, conscience-cleansing offering. Christ, on the other hand, “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins. . . . For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:12, 14). So also the replacement of many mortal priests by one eternally abiding priest means that perfection has arrived.

Christ’s indestructible life and the permanent priesthood he exercises offer a glorious twofold benefit for believers. First, since he is the ever-living High Priest, he makes constant intercession on behalf of worshipers who seek access to God through him. Our author will soon stress that Christ’s *atonement* task—the offering up of his body as the sacrifice that cleanses consciences and “perfects” worshipers—has been achieved “once for all” (7:27). Therefore, unlike OT priests, who always stood attending to sacrificial tasks that were never finished, he has taken his seat at God’s right hand (10:1–13). Yet he still carries on another crucial priestly role, that of *intercessory prayer* on behalf of his people. This he does without ceasing. His petitions, uniquely combining suffering-wrought compassion and obedience-demonstrated integrity (2:17–18; 4:14–16), receive God’s approval and positive response (Rom. 8:34).

Second, because Christ’s priestly intercession is both constant and effective, “He is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.” He announced salvation and has become the founder and source of that eternal salvation (Heb. 2:3, 10; 5:9). The salvation he imparts is both complete and eternal. Our author has used two Greek phrases, translated “forever” or “for all time”—*eis ton aiōna* (1:8; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28; 13:8, 21) and *eis to diēnekes* (7:3; 10:12, 14)—to express ongoing temporal continuity. Here, however, he chooses a third construction (*eis to panteles*) that, while possibly including reference to temporal duration, conveys comprehensiveness in all respects (hence “to the uttermost”). The salvation this priest provides is complete, addressing every aspect of our spiritual need.

7:26–27 The final evidence of the superiority of Jesus, the Melchizedek-like priest, over the priests descended from Aaron is his absolute purity—“holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners.”

Previously we heard that “it was fitting” for God to lead his sons to glory by “perfecting” (consecrating as their high priest) the founder of their salvation through suffering (2:10). Jesus’ substitutionary suffering to the extreme of death was the only “fitting” way for the holy God to forgive those defiled by guilt and to receive them into his presence. Therefore, what Jesus came to share with sinful humans—their flesh and blood and their experience of suffering and temptation—qualified him to be a “merciful and faithful high priest” and to “make propitiation for the sins of the people” (2:14–18).

Yet, even though the Son of God’s deep sympathy for struggling sinners encourages us, one sharp line distinguishes this priest from his people: though tempted in every way as we are, Jesus was “yet without sin” (4:14–15). Christ’s utter sinlessness—the complete absence of any moral stain or defilement whatsoever—qualified him to offer himself unblemished as the once-for-all atoning sacrifice for others’ sins (9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22–24). The high priests in Aaron’s order needed to offer sacrificial blood for their own sins before they could offer atoning blood on behalf of the rest of Israel (Ex. 29:10–14; Lev. 8:14–17; 16:6–19). This two-step process was necessary because those priests shared not only others’ weakness but also their guilt, having succumbed to temptation (Heb. 5:2–3). Here the “daily” morning and evening offering of lambs is in view (Ex. 29:38–42), although the annual Day of Atonement will be discussed later (Heb. 9:25–10:4). Jesus, on the other hand, needed no atonement for his own sins, since he had none.

Because he is the sinless priest who offered himself as the unstained sacrifice, Jesus is now “exalted above the heavens” (7:26). The heavenly venue of his present priestly ministry shows its superiority, as we will soon see: Aaronic priests minister in an earthly copy of God’s true sanctuary, but Jesus serves at God’s right hand in the heavenly original (8:1–5; 9:11–12, 24–28).

7:28 Our preacher concludes with a summary contrasting the Aaronic priesthood with the superior priestly office of the Son, setting the two over against each other in parallel clauses (table 1.3).

TABLE 1.3: Hebrews 7:28: Contrasting the Aaronic Priesthood and the Priesthood of Christ

For <i>the law</i>	appoints as high priests	<i>men</i>	<i>having weakness,</i>
but <i>the word of the oath</i> (which was after the law)	[appoints]	<i>a Son</i>	<i>perfected forever.</i>

Here the priestly orders of Levi (Aaron) and Melchizedek are contrasted in three respects:

- (1) *God's means of appointment.* Since high priests cannot be self-promoted but must be God-appointed (5:4–5), God has revealed his selection in two different ways. Levitical priests were designated by the “law” of genealogical descent, while the priest better than they was installed by God’s word of oath (recalling 7:20–22).
- (2) *The high priestly appointees.* “Men in their weakness” served in the Levitical priesthood. Superior to them is the Son, extolled as superior to the angels (1:4–14; 4:14; 5:5; 7:3). Obviously the contrast is not intended to deny that the divine Son fully embraced a complete human nature, body and soul. But it calls attention to the Levitical priests’ mere humanity and frailty, in contrast to the Son’s eternal vitality (7:16). They were weak, as moral failures (5:2–3; 7:27), and so were mortal. Because they were mortal, there had to be many of them. The Son alone has been “perfected forever,” withstanding temptation through suffering and now consecrated as a final priest, who needs no successor (7:23–24; cf. 5:7–10).
- (3) *Historical order.* One significant exception to strict parallelism in the two clauses of verse 28 is the additional description of the oath as coming “*later than the law.*” The fact that history is driving toward a climactic conclusion means that what arrives later in the implementation of God’s plan of redemption is superior to that which preceded it (1:1–4; 8:6–13; 9:8–10).

This resounding declaration of the superiority of the Son’s high priestly office has brought the sermon to its main “point” (*kephalaion*; 8:1), setting up a transition to the theme of the priestly tasks the Son has accomplished and continues to perform on our behalf.

Response

Hebrews opens our eyes to the unparalleled greatness of Jesus’ high priestly office. Our preacher persuades our insecure hearts that Jesus’ offering of himself as our atoning sacrifice cleanses us through and through, inside and out, and that his ongoing intercession secures our complete salvation. Since God has provided a High Priest who lives forever and serves forever on our behalf “above the heavens” (7:26) “in the true tent that the Lord set up” (8:2), we have every reason to hold fast to the better hope that he has introduced, “through which we draw near to God” (7:19).

The invitation and summons to “draw near”—to approach God’s presence in grateful worship and humble entreaty—opens and closes the entire discussion of Christ’s priestly office and activity (4:14–16; 10:19–25). This astonishing privilege, to “draw near to God,” appears twice in our present text (7:19, 25). What more fitting response could we offer to the arrival, the arising, of the priest in the order of Melchizedek than to avail ourselves of this access to our Father’s throne of grace?

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 8:1–10:31

Having established Jesus' superior *credentials* as high priest from Genesis 14:17–20 and Psalm 110:4, our preacher now shows that Christ's mediatorial *ministry* surpasses that of Levi and Aaron as well (Heb. 8:6). The controlling OT text for this exploration of Christ's ministry is Jeremiah 31:31–34, quoted in Hebrews 8:8–12 and again, briefly, in 10:16–17. Jeremiah prophesied the future establishment of a "new covenant" to replace the broken covenant mediated through Moses. The "better promises" of this new covenant included (1) the writing of God's law onto hearts; (2) expanded access to God's presence for worshipers, "from the least of them to the greatest" (8:11); and (3) full and final forgiveness of sins.

God initiates covenants because he delights to live among his subjects. At the heart of the Lord's covenant with Israel, therefore, were a sanctuary and its rituals of worship. The sanctuary's regulations, restrictions, and repetitions demonstrated the need for a better way to maintain communion between the Lord and his people (Heb. 9:1–10). Christ's priestly ministry is that better way: his sacrifice of himself cleanses consciences, consecrates worshipers once for all, and inaugurates unbreakable communion (9:11–28). The incessant flow of blood from slain bulls and goats dramatized the OT system's inability to repair the breach between sinful worshipers and their holy God. Psalm 40 announced that Christ would come to accomplish God's will, achieving what animals' deaths could not: the removal forever of sin's stain (Heb. 10:1–18).

Because of Jesus' sacrifice, hearers may enter God's heavenly sanctuary with confidence and steadfast hope. They must "draw near" not merely as individuals but as a community in covenant with God and each other (10:19–25). A second sobering warning (10:26–31; cf. 6:4–8) puts us on notice that apostasy from Christ and his new covenant blessings has worse consequences than disregard for prohibitions of the law did. But, as he did in 6:4–12, our preacher balances this terrifying warning with a reassuring recollection of the evidence of God's transforming grace in his hearers' faithful response to persecution when the gospel's light first burst into their lives (10:32–35).

HEBREWS 8:1–6

8 Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ²a minister in the holy places, in the true tent¹ that the Lord set up, not man. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.” ⁶But as it is, Christ² has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

¹Or *tabernacle*; also verse 5 ²Greek *he*

Section Overview: Christ’s Better Ministry in the Heavenly Sanctuary

This paragraph is the center of the sermon and the pivot point of its exposition of Jesus’ priestly ministry, as discussion turns from his qualifications (Heb. 4:14–7:28) to his ministrations (8:1–10:31). In Hebrews 8:1–6, our author previews the aspects of Jesus’ priestly ministry that he will discuss later in depth:

- (1) Jesus’ present *posture*, “seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty” (8:1–2; cf. 10:11–14)
- (2) The *sanctuary* in which Jesus serves: “in heaven, . . . the holy places, . . . the true tent that the Lord set up” (8:1–2, 4–5; cf. 9:1–5, 11–12, 23–24; 10:19–22)
- (3) The *sacrifice* Jesus offered: “It is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer” (8:3; cf. 9:6–10; 10:1–22)
- (4) The *covenant* Jesus mediates: “The covenant he mediates is better . . . enacted on better promises” (8:6; cf. 8:7–13; 9:15–20; 10:15–18)

Section Outline

- I. Our High Priest and his sanctuary: we have a High Priest who ministers in heaven (8:1–2)
 - A. The main point is that we have a High Priest who fits our need (8:1a)
 - B. He sits and serves in heaven, the true tent (8:1b–2)

- II. Our High Priest and his sacrifice: all high priests offer sacrifices to God (8:3)
 - A. All high priests are appointed to offer sacrifices (8:3a)
 - B. So our High Priest had a sacrifice to offer (8:3b)
- III. Our priest and his sanctuary: the earthly tent is a replica of the heavenly sanctuary that Moses saw on Sinai (8:4–5)
 - A. Our High Priest could not serve in the earthly tent (8:4)
 - B. But the earthly tent where Aaron's sons serve is just a replica of the real sanctuary, which was shown to Moses on Mount Sinai (8:5)
- IV. Our High Priest and the better covenant: the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry fits the superiority of the new covenant he mediates (8:6)
 - A. Christ's priestly ministry surpasses Aaron's (8:6a)
 - B. Christ mediates a better covenant, grounded in better promises (8:6b)

Comment

8:1–2 With the announcement that “we have such a high priest” as has just been described, we have reached the “point” (*kephalaion*) of the sermon. This Greek word appears once elsewhere in the NT, designating a sum of money (Acts 22:28). In extrabiblical Greek it was used in the sense it is here: “summary, main point.” In Hebrews 7:26 we heard that “such a high priest,” holy and innocent, was fitting to meet our spiritual need. The good news is that “*we have* such a high priest.”

Psalms 110:1 was enlisted earlier to establish Christ's superiority to angels, since he is enthroned “at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3, 13). The fourth verse of the same psalm was enlisted to show that Christ remains a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek by virtue of his indestructible life and God's immutable oath (5:6, 10; 6:20–7:28). Now these two verses converge to establish (among other points) that the Melchizedek-like priest-king conducts his ministry not in an earthly tent but in God's original heavenly sanctuary.

The sanctuary in which Christ ministers as High Priest is “the holy places” and “the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.” Later, this sanctuary will be characterized in similar terms:

the greater and more perfect *tent* (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) . . . the *holy places* (9:11–12)

not . . . *holy places* made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but . . . *heaven* itself (9:24)

In calling heaven “the *true* tent, which the Lord set up [or “pitched”; cf. Num. 24:6 LXX], not man,” our author is not echoing Platonic idealism, which devalued the reality or significance of the physical universe. Rather, his point is that the

tabernacle constructed in the wilderness was derivative in its design from God's eternal heavenly residence, his true "dwelling place" beyond the universe of time and space. OT leaders such as Solomon recognized that the earthly temple, as splendid as it was, could not begin to rival "heaven your dwelling place" (1 Kings 8:30; cf. Acts 7:48–50). The earthly sanctuaries (tabernacle and temple) shared the defilement of their human builders and thus needed to be purified through the sprinkled blood of slain animals (Heb. 9:21–23); and further, they shared the mutability that pervades and will eventually bring decomposition to the present created order (1:10–12; 12:25–28).

8:3 The mention of Jesus' role as a "minister" (*leitourgos*; 8:2) in the heavenly Holy Place introduces the purpose of priests' appointment, which is "to offer gifts and sacrifices." This previews a major theme to be explored in chapters 8–10: "this priest" needed to have "something to offer." The "something" Christ offered was infinitely more costly and effective than the gifts and sacrifices presented by the Aaronic priests. Their offerings consisted of animals' blood; our High Priest sacrificed his own body and has brought his own blood into the heavenly Most Holy Place (9:11–14, 25–26; 10:1–10).

8:4–5 Our preacher revisits the objection that Jesus' genealogy would disqualify him from priestly ministry in Israel's sanctuaries (cf. 7:13–14). Previously he argued that Christ's lack of Aaronic ancestry was no disadvantage because God had announced in Psalm 110:4 a different criterion—his own oath—by which he would designate a priest superior to Aaron (Heb. 7:15–22). Now the fact that Aaron's offspring minister on earth shows that Christ's ministry must take place in a better Holy Place: heaven. God had directed Moses to make the tabernacle and its fixtures "according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain" (cf. Ex. 25:40). God's heavenly palace was the template, while the earthly sanctuary was a "copy and shadow" replicating that original in miniature (cf. Heb. 9:23–24; 10:1). Christ has entered that heavenly original, where God dwells in the fullness of his glory, in order to represent and intercede for his people.

8:6 The superiority of the heavenly sanctuary to its earthly copies, the tabernacle and temple, implies that Christ's ministry surpasses that of the Levitical priests. This comparison leads to the superiority of the covenant he mediates. Covenant (*diathēkē*) is the overarching theme under which our author will articulate the motifs of sanctuary and sacrifice. Fourteen of the seventeen appearances of "covenant" (*diathēkē*) in Hebrews occur in chapters 8–10. The others are in 7:22, anticipating the theme (cf. note there); 12:24; and 13:20.

Our preacher's reasoning replicates that used in 1:4, where he used the same comparative and correlative adjectives to contrast the Son to the angels:

as much superior [*kreittōn*] to angels as [*hosō*] the name he has inherited is more excellent [*diaphorōteron*] than theirs (1:4)

a ministry that is as much more excellent [*diaphorōteras*] than the old as [*hosō*] the covenant he mediates is better [*kreittovos*] (8:6)

Jeremiah 31:31–34, now to be cited, shows that the two covenants being contrasted are the pact that God made with Israel at Sinai, on the one hand, and a “new covenant” now mediated by Christ, on the other. The first covenant had been enacted on the basis of the Levitical priesthood (Heb. 7:11), but the new covenant is enacted on the basis of better promises, announced in Jeremiah’s prophecy: heart transformation, intimate access, complete forgiveness. The change of priesthood has produced a change in the whole covenant relationship binding God to his people.

Response

Generations of Israel’s offspring had associated the Jerusalem temple with God’s presence on earth and sought assurance of forgiveness in blood poured out and carcasses consumed on its altar. The first generation who heard this Hebrews sermon needed to realize that Jesus had offered the final sacrifice for sins and entered a sanctuary that, though unseen to human eyes, radiates a reality that casts earthly Zion into the shadows.

Twenty-first-century Christians may not be drawn to the sights, sounds, smells, or tastes of the sanctuary on Mount Zion. But we too may confuse what is most visible with what is most significant. Hebrews disabuses us of that confusion, not by denying physical reality (as in Platonic and Gnostic dualism) but by opening our hearts’ eyes to the heavenly sanctuary Moses glimpsed on Sinai, where Jesus intercedes for us and mediates a new covenant binding us to God. When this world’s all-too-visible miseries loom large, let faith refocus our vision, “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith” (12:2 AT).

HEBREWS 8:7–13

⁷For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

⁸For he finds fault with them when he says:¹

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah,

⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers
on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the
land of Egypt.

- For they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.
- ¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
- ¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor
and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.
- ¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.”

¹³In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

¹Some manuscripts *For finding fault with it he says to them*

Section Overview: The New and Better Covenant

In support of the statement that Christ mediates a better covenant (Heb. 8:6), the preacher cites Jeremiah 31:31–34, the Lord’s promise to establish a new covenant with his people. This promise implied that the covenant the Lord made with Israel at Sinai suffered from a fatal flaw: Israel’s violation of their commitment. By promising a new covenant in “coming” days, God pronounced the first covenant obsolete and close to disappearing. On the other hand, the new covenant is based on better promises: God’s law will be written on human hearts, the Lord will be their God and they his people, all his people will know him (having access to his presence), and he will forgive their sins forever.

Section Outline

- I. Preamble: the Lord’s promise of a coming new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) implied the faultiness of his first covenant with Israel at Sinai (Heb. 8:7–8a)
- II. Prophecy: the Lord will make a new covenant with his people, unlike the one he made after the exodus (8:8b–12)
 - A. In days to come, the Lord will make a new covenant (8:8b)
 - B. Israel departed from the first covenant, so God rejected them (8:9)
 - C. The new covenant will be based on better promises (8:10–12)
 1. The Lord will write his laws into minds and hearts (8:10ab)
 2. The Lord will be Israel’s God, and they his people (8:10c)
 3. Everyone in Israel, from the least to the greatest, will know the Lord (8:11)
 4. The Lord will forgive their sins completely, refusing to remember them forever (8:12)

III. Implication: the OT promise of a new covenant rendered the first covenant obsolete, old, and nearly disappearing (8:13)

Comment

8:7–8 Christ is mediator of a better covenant, “enacted on better promises” than the law and its Levitical priesthood (8:6). For the third time in Hebrews our preacher enlists an OT text to testify to the inadequacy of the OT order (cf. 4:7–8; 7:11). By promising (in Jer. 31:31–34) to establish a “new covenant” with Israel and Judah in the future, God implied that the “first covenant,” made at Sinai in the aftermath of the exodus, was not “faultless.” If it had been, a second covenant would not have been called for.

Elsewhere in the LXX and NT, “faultless” (*amemptos*) refers to individuals’ moral blamelessness, as in Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; 4:17; 9:20; 11:4 and in such NT texts as Luke 1:6 and 1 Thessalonians 2:10; 3:13; 5:23. Our author also has persons—not the covenant per se—in view. Although he characterizes the covenant enacted at Sinai as “not faultless,” he clarifies that the “fault” lay not in the law’s requirements but in the Israelites: “find[ing] fault [*memphomenos*] with *them*”—not with the covenant, but with people who “did not continue in my covenant” (Heb. 8:9).

The promise of a “new covenant” in Jeremiah 31:31–34 is crucial to our understanding of redemptive history. When he instituted the Lord’s Supper, Jesus interpreted the cup as a sign and seal of “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25) and mentioned the new covenant promise of forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24). Paul draws on the Jeremiah 31 prophecy to contrast the “glory” of Moses’ ministry, which brought death and condemnation, with Paul’s privilege, as a minister of the new covenant, to proclaim righteousness in the life-imparting power of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:5–18). Paul applies “old covenant” to the Scriptures given through Moses (2 Cor. 3:14–15), establishing the basis for the familiar titles of the two parts of our Bibles: Old Testament and New Testament. The Lord would establish this new covenant in “days [that] are coming,” “after those days” (Heb. 8:8, 10), a new era of redemptive history. Through Jeremiah and other prophets the Lord foretold that in the “last days” (Heb. 1:2; cf. 9:26) he would come to his people in justice and salvation (Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 30:3–24; Dan. 2:28; Hos. 3:5).

The permanence of the new covenant may have inclined our author to amend the LXX slightly, replacing “I will decree/confer [*diathēsomai*]” with, literally, “I will complete [*syntelesō*]” a new covenant, using a term belonging to the “perfection” word group that is so significant for this sermon. Just a few chapters later in Jeremiah, the LXX uses “complete” (*synteledō*) to describe the covenant inauguration rite in which Israelites passed between animal carcasses, enacting a self-maledictory oath (Jer. 34:15 = 41:15 LXX).

8:9 The new covenant is “not like the covenant that I made with their fathers” because the Israelites “did not continue” in that first covenant. With a strong arm

the Lord “took them by the hand” to lead them out of slavery. This tactile imagery of God’s personal and powerful engagement to free his captive people, anticipated in Hebrews 2:16 (cf. comment on 2:15–16), compounds the guilt of their infidelity. They professed allegiance when the covenant was read and ratified at Sinai (Ex. 24:3–8), but when Moses went back up the mountain for further directions, they turned to worshiping a golden calf (Exodus 32). Then, as Psalm 95 testified, that generation disbelieved God’s voice and failed to enter his rest (Heb. 3:7–11). Finally, by the time of Jeremiah, faithless Israel and Judah had been banished from the Promised Land (Deut. 28:15–68; Jer. 2:1–32).

8:10 Our preacher has piqued our curiosity about the “better promises” on which the new covenant would be established (8:6). Jeremiah’s prophecy mentions four ways in which the new covenant would surpass its predecessor. The Hebrews author does not immediately elaborate on these promises, instead moving to conclude that the announcement of a new covenant implies the obsolescence of the old. But Hebrews 9:1–10:17 will show implicitly how the new covenant’s promises are fulfilled.

First, whereas at Sinai God inscribed his commandments on stone tablets (Ex. 24:12; 31:18; 34:1), in the new covenant “I will put my laws into their minds, and . . . on their hearts” (Heb. 8:10). The apostle Paul interprets this promise in light of the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctifying our affections and desires (2 Cor. 3:3). In Hebrews, the contrast between external and internal is expressed in the contrast between OT rites that could only “sanctify for the purification of the flesh” and the blood of Christ, which can “purify our conscience . . . to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:13–14; cf. 9:9–10).

The second promise, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” appears often in Scripture to summarize the mutual commitment between the Lord and his human subjects (Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 24:7; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 34:30; 37:27; Zech. 8:8; 2 Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:3; etc.). The new covenant is secured by God’s oath-bound promise to Abraham and his oath-bound appointment of Christ as Abraham’s and our priestly intercessor (Heb. 6:13–20; 7:1–28). In this better covenant, therefore, the bond between the Lord and his people is unbreakable.

8:11 The third promise, that all God’s people, “from the least of them to the greatest,” will know him, can be understood against the backdrop of the mediatorial role of the OT Levitical priests. Priests were to teach God’s law to Israel (Deut. 33:8–10; Mal. 2:4–7). Parents were to teach the Torah to their children (Deut. 6:6–9), but their knowledge of God’s word was dependent on priests who preserved it, read it aloud, and explained it (Deut. 31:9–13; Ezra 7:1–10; Neh. 8:1–8). Moreover, access to the Lord’s presence was limited: only priests could minister in the tabernacle’s Holy Place, and only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place.

These restrictions showed that “the way into the holy places” for all God’s people was “not yet opened” (Heb. 9:6–9). Hebrews does not infer from the promise that “they shall not teach, each one his neighbor . . . , saying, ‘Know the Lord’”

that the new covenant community needs no recognized leaders or teachers (Heb. 13:7, 17). The preacher himself is teaching them in this “word of exhortation” (13:22). Nevertheless, Christ’s coming has effected a wider access to God’s word and to his Holy Spirit’s instruction from that word (1 John 2:26–27), as well as a more intimate access to God’s presence for all believers.

8:12 The previous three promises flow from the fourth, which these two lines express in complementary ways:

I will be merciful [will forgive, turning away my wrath] toward their iniquities.

I will remember their sins no more.

“Merciful” reflects a Greek word (*hileōs*) that differs from the “mercy” (*eleos*) of 4:16 (cf. 2:17). The term here belongs to the cognate group that expresses the turning aside of God’s wrath from the guilty through the forgiveness of their sins (Ex. 32:12–14; Num. 14:19–20). This family of related words includes *hilaskomai* (“make propitiation”; Heb. 2:17; Luke 18:13; Ps. 78:9 LXX); *hilastērion* (“mercy seat”; Heb. 9:5; Ex. 25:17–21; or “propitiation”; Rom. 3:25); and *hilasmos* (“propitiation”; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The animal sacrifices of the OT provided a “reminder of sins every year,” an incessant witness to the inability of bulls’ and goats’ blood to remove sin’s guilt and defilement (Heb. 10:3–4). Our preacher will explore the sufficiency of Jesus’ sacrifice to achieve complete forgiveness of sins and deep cleansing of conscience (9:11–15, 23–28; 10:5–14), concluding: “Where there is forgiveness of these [sins]”—where God *refuses to remember* our offenses—“there is no longer any offering for sin” (10:17–18).

8:13 Our author concludes from Jeremiah 31:31–34 that, when God promised a “new” covenant, he relegated the first covenant to the category of what was aging and obsolete, near the point of disappearing altogether. Thus the OT announced that the Sinai covenant, as the framework for God’s relationship to his people, was destined to be discarded.

Response

Through the prophet Jeremiah, weeping amid the wreckage Israel and Judah had made of the covenant enacted through Moses, God revived hope by his promise of a better covenant in days to come. That covenant’s “better promises”—transformation of heart, belonging to the Lord our God, open access to his presence and word, complete forgiveness of sins—have been fulfilled through the sacrifice of Jesus, the mediator and guarantor of this new covenant.

Are we, new covenant believers, inclined to take those stunning promises for granted? Do we assume that forgiveness and cleansing are trivial matters, granted cheaply? That access to the Holy One is our right rather than a privilege bestowed in his mercy on us who deserve wrath, banishment, and destruction? Rivers of

blood from countless animal victims and daunting restrictions circumscribing approach to God were designed to impress on Israel both the gravity of their sinful pollution and the magnificence of God's reconciling mercy. Pause to savor those promises—deep cleansing, open access, complete forgiveness—and give thanks to the Lord who made them and who kept them through Jesus, his Son and our priest forever.

HEBREWS 9:1–10

9 Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly place of holiness. ²For a tent¹ was prepared, the first section, in which were the lampstand and the table and the bread of the Presence.² It is called the Holy Place. ³Behind the second curtain was a second section³ called the Most Holy Place,⁴ having the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's staff that budded, and the tablets of the covenant. ⁵Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

⁶These preparations having thus been made, the priests go regularly into the first section, performing their ritual duties, ⁷but into the second only the high priest goes, and he but once a year, and not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the unintentional sins of the people. ⁸By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing ⁹(which is symbolic for the present age).⁴ According to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper, ¹⁰but deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.

¹Or *tabernacle*; also verses 11, 21 ²Greek *the presentation of the loaves* ³Greek *tent*; also verses 6, 8 ⁴Or *which is symbolic for the age then present*

Section Overview: The Old Covenant's Earthly Tent

Having introduced the Sinai covenant, Israel's breach of it, and its divinely promised replacement by a new and better covenant (Heb. 8:7–13), our author discusses that first covenant's provisions for worshipers' approach to God. That aging, obsolescent covenant included regulations governing who could approach God, how near they could come, and what service they were to offer him. It also had an earthly sanctuary, with a floor plan and furniture shown to Moses when he met God on the mountain (8:5). After a brief survey of the tabernacle's design and contents (9:2–5), the discussion proceeds to the priests' and the high priest's respective ministries in the tabernacle's two chambers (9:6–7). The restrictions

limiting access to God's Most Holy Place were the Holy Spirit's demonstration, via symbolism, that the new covenant promise of access to God for all his people would not arrive as long as the earthly sanctuary functioned as the focal point of worship. Levitical priests executed physical rites that could not cleanse worshippers' consciences, and the regulations directing those rites were designed to be temporary, lasting only "until the time of reformation" promised by God would arrive (9:10).

Section Outline

- I. Introduction: the first covenant's ministry restrictions and its tent (9:1)
- II. The tent: its floor plan and furniture (9:2–5)
 - A. The first chamber, the Holy Place (9:2)
 - B. The second chamber, the Most Holy Place (9:3–5)
- III. The ministry restrictions and their meaning (9:6–10)
 - A. Priests' daily ministries in the first chamber (9:6)
 - B. The high priest's yearly ministry in the second chamber (9:7)
 - C. The meaning of the restrictions (9:8–10)
 - 1. The way into the holy places was not yet open (9:8–9a)
 - 2. The sacrifices could not cleanse the conscience, but only the flesh (9:9b–10ab)
 - 3. A time of reformation would come (9:10c)

Comment

9:1 Our preacher begins his exploration of the contrast between the old and new covenants by discussing the sanctuary and the service of worship offered there. God's purpose for his covenants is for people to draw near to him in worshipful engagement, offering their adoration and receiving his timely aid. Therefore the author introduces two themes: (1) "regulations for worship" and (2) "an earthly place of holiness." He will discuss them in reverse order, first the earthly Holy Place (vv. 2–5) and then the regulations for the worship conducted there (vv. 6–10).

The Holy Place belonging to the first covenant was "earthly." That is, it was on earth, in contrast to the "true tent that the Lord set up" in heaven (8:2), in which Christ ministers as our High Priest (8:1–4). The first covenant's sanctuary was "made with hands" and was "of this creation" (9:11), and therefore subject to change and decomposition (1:10–12).

9:2 Our author uses "tent" (*skēnē*; also in vv. 3, 6, 8) to refer to both of the chambers or "sections" (ESV) of the tabernacle, an enclosed tent that stood within a fenced, open-air courtyard. The "first" or outer section was called the Holy Place, while behind a second veil was a second section, called the Most Holy Place (vv. 3–5, 7). (The first veil, not mentioned in Hebrews but implied by "second veil," was in the outer doorway that led from the courtyard into the tent itself; cf. Ex. 36:37.)

A brief inventory of the furniture associated with each chamber sets the scene for the priestly ministries associated with these holy spaces.

Two items are mentioned in connection with the first section: a six-branched lampstand (cf. Ex. 25:31–40) and the table on which the “bread of the Presence” was set (cf. Ex. 25:23–30). Although Exodus states that the lampstand was made of gold and the table was overlaid with gold, our preacher bypasses this feature, instead mentioning gold three times when describing the contents of the Most Holy Place (Heb. 9:3–5). This gold reflects and radiates the greater glory of the inner, second section, in contrast to the first.

9:3–5 Behind the second curtain was a “section” (*skēnē*) called the Most Holy Place. Two items are associated with the Most Holy Place: the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant, also gold-covered. According to the OT, the altar of incense was actually in the Holy Place, immediately in front of the second curtain that led into the inner chamber (Ex. 30:6; 40:26–27). The altar’s placement outside the Most Holy Place enabled priests to burn incense on it every morning and evening throughout the year (Ex. 30:7–8).

Wishing to focus on the close association of the incense altar with the Most Holy Place and the Day of Atonement (cf. comment on Heb. 9:7), our preacher here modifies his language for accuracy. Instead of stating that this altar was “in” the Most Holy Place (as the lampstand and table were “in” the Holy Place), he says that the Most Holy Place was “having” (*echousa*) the altar and the ark of the covenant, not that it contained them both. The incense altar was closely tied to the Most Holy Place because from it on the Day of Atonement the high priest carried burning incense, “that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony, so that he does not die” (Lev. 16:13). Our author may also have in mind the description of Solomon’s temple, which identified this altar with the Most Holy Place (1 Kings 6:16–22).

The ark of the covenant was the focal point of the Most Holy Place, and our author gives it the most attention. The ark contained three items (Heb. 9:4), memorializing events of Israel’s years in the wilderness. (1) A golden urn contained manna, the “bread” the Lord provided to sustain his people in the wasteland. God directed that manna be placed in a jar before the “testimony,” that is, the two tablets of God’s covenant, which were placed inside the ark of the covenant—which is also called the “ark of the testimony” (Ex. 25:22; cf. 16:32–34; 25:16, 21). This manna was a token of the Lord’s “works,” which the Israelites saw over those forty years (Heb. 3:9). (2) Aaron’s staff, which had budded miraculously in the aftermath of Korah’s rebellion and destruction (Numbers 16–17), signified that priestly privilege can be granted only by God (Heb. 5:4). Again, the staff was preserved “before the testimony” (Num. 17:10–11). (3) As mentioned, inside the ark were also the “tablets of the covenant” (Ex. 25:21; 40:20; Deut. 10:1–5), which contained the text of the covenant delivered on Mount Sinai—the “first” covenant, which Israel had broken so grievously (Heb. 8:6–13).

On the cover of the ark were two cherubim of glory—superhuman defenders of the Lord’s holy majesty—who faced one another. Between them was the “mercy seat,” the place of propitiation²² for sin (Ex. 25:17–22; Lev. 16:14–16). This cover was the Lord’s royal throne and the place where he spoke to his servants (Ex. 25:22; Num. 7:89; 1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2).

Although one could explore the symbolic significance of the furniture in both chambers,²³ our author dismisses this opportunity as beside the point he is making. In Hebrews 11:32 he will again abridge what could have been a longer discussion, there mentioning time considerations. His purpose is to focus rather on the worship activities conducted by priests in the tabernacle’s two chambers.

9:6 Verse 1 mentioned the first covenant’s “regulations for worship” (*dikaiōmata latreias*). As the discussion turns from the tabernacle’s structure and furnishings to the ministry conducted in it, these terms mark the boundaries of the paragraph: the priests’ “ritual duties” (*tas latreias*) open the paragraph, which concludes with “regulations [*dikaiōmata*] for the body” (v. 10). The Greek syntax of verses 6–7 emphasizes the contrast between the ministry activities befitting each of the tent’s sections (table 1.4).

TABLE 1.4: Contrasting Ministries of the Holy and Most Holy Place (Heb. 9:6–7)

On the one hand (<i>men</i>)	into the first tent	regularly	enter the priests
On the other hand (<i>de</i>)	into the second	once a year	only the high priest

In the “first” (outer) section, priests “regularly” (*dia pantos* = always) performed several worship tasks. The lampstand burned continuously, so priests replenished its oil regularly (Ex. 27:20–21). The bread of the Presence was replaced each Sabbath (Ex. 25:30; Lev. 24:5–9). Incense was burned twice a day on the altar in front of the curtain leading to the Most Holy Place (Ex. 30:6–8; cf. Luke 1:8–9).

9:7 The plurality of the priests and the regularity of their activities in the outer section were in stark contrast to the high priest’s solitary and infrequent entrance into the tabernacle’s second chamber, the Most Holy Place. Three differences set apart worship performed in the first section from that in the second: (a) Into the former *many* priests entered, whereas the high priest *alone* entered the latter (Lev. 16:17). (b) In the former, priests fulfilled their tasks “regularly” (daily and weekly), whereas the high priest entered the latter “but once a year,” on the Day of Atonement (Ex. 30:10; Lev. 16:34). (c) Those familiar with the regulations would know that the regular tasks in the former (attending the lampstand, the table, and the incense altar) involved no shedding of blood,²⁴ whereas the high priest entered

22 The Greek *hilastērion*, like the Hebrew *kapporet* behind it, expresses the effect of sprinkling sacrificial blood on the ark’s golden lid on the Day of Atonement: God’s righteous wrath is deflected from his guilty people as their sins are punished through the death of a substitute. See the cognate verb “make propitiation” (*hilaskomai*) (Heb. 2:17) and the other NT appearance of *hilastērion* (Rom. 3:25), and *hilasmos* (1 John 2:2; 4:10).

23 See Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1995); Tremper Longman III, *Immanuel in Our Place: Seeing Christ in Israel’s Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001).

24 Animals were sacrificed twice daily on an altar outside the tabernacle, in the courtyard (Ex. 29:38–42; Num. 28:3–4), as our author will note (Heb. 10:11–12).

the latter “not without blood” (AT) for the atonement of his own and Israel’s sins (Lev. 16:11, 14–15). This offering of blood foreshadows Christ’s offering of “his own blood” when he entered the “greater and more perfect tent,” the heavenly Most Holy Place (Heb. 9:11–14).

9:8–10 The significance of the contrast between the tabernacle’s two chambers is now interpreted, but in a way that is difficult both linguistically and conceptually. The linguistic difficulties focus on the meaning of the Greek represented in the ESV by “not yet opened” (*mēpō pēphanērōsthai*), “the first section” (*tēs prōtēs skēnēs*), “still standing” (*echousēs stasin*), and “for the present age” (*eis ton kairon ton enestēkota*).

With respect to “not yet opened,” since the subject is a “way,” we might expect a verb meaning “open,” such as *anoigō*. Instead we have a verb (*phaneroō*) meaning “manifest” or “reveal.” The regulations restricting who could enter the OT tabernacle’s two chambers were the Holy Spirit’s way of *revealing* that the route by which all God’s people could draw near to God had not yet appeared in redemptive history. That “new and living way” of access would arrive only through the priestly ministry of Christ (Heb. 10:19–22).

With respect to “the first section,” the ESV rightly indicates that in verses 2, 3, 6, and 7 the first and second tents (*skēnē*) are the outer and inner “sections” or chambers of the tabernacle—the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. Scholars debate whether the reference in verse 8 is to the Holy Place only (so ESV) or to the entire earthly sanctuary associated with the first covenant. The most likely solution to the text’s conceptual challenges (as we will see) supports the ESV’s consistency in interpretation: the disclosure of the way into the Most Holy Place depends on the removal of the “first section”—that is, of the Holy Place populated by many priests in ceaseless activity—as the locus of worship.

With respect to “is still standing,” an unusual Greek word (*stasin*) suggests that the issue is probably not whether the first “section” still *exists* but whether it still *functions* as the divinely appointed site of worship. As long as that first section still “has standing” as the divinely authorized venue for worship, the restrictions remain, barring any but the high priest from God’s presence.

With respect to “for the present age,” the question is whether the author has in view the age that *was* present when the first covenant’s sanctuary served as Israel’s worship venue or the age that *is now* present by virtue of Christ’s priestly mediation. Put another way, is “the present age” *prior to* or *identified with* “the time of reformation,” which Christ has inaugurated (v. 10)? Our author’s frame of thought, as well as the sense of similar expressions elsewhere in the NT (Matt. 12:32; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:21), favor the conclusion that “the present age,” symbolized by the first section and its regulations, was *brought to an end* by the arrival of “the time of reformation.”

Drawing together our linguistic conclusions, we can trace the author’s reasoning: The Holy Spirit (who speaks in Scripture [10:15] and acts in the apostolic church [2:4; 6:4]) has now shown that the tabernacle’s two sections symbolize (*parabolē*) two ways of worship, befitting two successive covenants and ages in God’s redemptive

plan. Our discussion has referred to the Holy Place and Most Holy Place, respectively, as the tabernacle's "outer" and "inner" sections, but Hebrews calls them "first" and "second." Their spatial relationship—the high priest must move through "the first" to enter "the second"—also symbolizes chronological succession.

The first section (outer chamber), in which many priests repeatedly performed actions that could not cleanse consciences, illustrates the insufficiency of the old covenant's *entire* earthly sanctuary with its sacrifices—a system beset with the imperfections of "the present age." The "gifts and sacrifices" offered by the many priests "cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper." The ceremonial regulations concerning food and drink and washings, like goats' and bulls' blood, touch only "the body" (*sarx*, rendered "flesh" in v. 13) and cannot remove sin's defilement from the conscience. As long as that system functions, the way into God's Most Holy Place remains hidden.

On the other hand, the second section, entered by a solitary high priest once a year with atoning blood, provides a *preview* of Christ's entrance into heaven, "the greater and more perfect tent," bringing his own blood, shed once for all to cleanse the consciences of believers (9:11–14). His appearance in history "at the end of the ages" (v. 26) has inaugurated "the time of reformation," for his sacrifice and exaltation have opened unrestricted communion between the Lord and his people. The route of access for all into God's presence is "set right" (*diorthōsis* = "reformation"; ESV) and displayed at last. This term represents the rectifying of something damaged or defective. A related term refers to political or social reforms in Acts 24:2, and the cognate verb appears in Jeremiah 7:3–5 LXX with the sense of "to correct." The restrictions surrounding access to the first covenant's sanctuary were the Holy Spirit's signal that radical repair was needed if God's people were ever to make their way into his presence.

Response

Knowing how scenes of splendor strike our own senses and grip our own hearts with wonder and awe, we can appreciate why the OT sanctuaries—the tabernacle and later the temple—were designed by God in stunning beauty in order to overwhelm the Israelites with holy reverence for his majesty. Gold gleamed from the furnishings, reflecting his glory. Priests constantly attended to the signs of his light-giving presence, his food-furnishing faithfulness, his ever-listening ear. Once a year, for the whole community, innocent blood was shed to avert sin's just retribution by covering sin's defilement. Surely faith should be fortified by all that the eyes could see! Yet Hebrews informs us that the visible splendor and the multiple actions of multiple intermediaries were symptomatic of a system of covenant communion in dire need of repair. Our hope of welcome into our Creator's presence lies not in gorgeously appointed facilities or elaborate rituals but in the solitary sacrifice of Jesus the Son of God and his never-failing intercession at God's right hand. To focus our faith on him is to "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (12:28).

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 9:11–28

Having sketched the inadequacy of the first (Sinai) covenant (8:7–13), its sanctuary, and its worship (9:1–10), our author explores the superiority of Christ's high priestly ministry, with reference to the themes of sanctuary, sacrifice, and covenant. The sanctuary in which he serves is heaven itself, and the sacrifice he offers is his own blood (9:11–14, 21–28). Through his death he redeemed people who, by transgressing the old covenant, had forfeited their lives; thus he mediates a new covenant that secures their eternal blessedness (9:15–20).

HEBREWS 9:11–14

¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come,¹ then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify² for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our³ conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

¹ Some manuscripts *good things to come* ² Or *For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies* ³ Some manuscripts *your*

Section Overview: Christ's Conscience-Cleansing Blood

The reality foreshadowed by the OT high priest's once-a-year entrance into the Most Holy Place has now appeared in the person and ministry of Christ, the High Priest who delivers the good things God promised in the new covenant. Both the sanctuary Christ entered and the sacrificial blood he presented to God surpass the first covenant's earthly Holy Place and its rituals. As a result, Christ has secured

for those who trust him not a temporary reprieve from exclusion from a handmade tent but eternal redemption and endless access to God’s heavenly sanctuary. Now that Christ has purified our consciences from evil deeds that breed death, we may and must serve the living God.

Section Outline

- I. Christ has appeared as the High Priest who grants the good blessings of the new covenant (9:11–12)
 - A. He entered a better sanctuary, not made by human hands (9:11)
 - B. He brought better blood, not that of animals but his own (9:12a)
 - C. He secured eternal redemption (9:12b)
- II. The flesh-purifying blood of animals foreshadowed the conscience-purifying blood of Christ (9:13–14)
 - A. The blood and ashes of slain animals produce ceremonial purification (9:13)
 - B. The blood of Christ produces conscience purification (9:14)

Comment

9:11–12 The conjunction “But” signals the contrast between the old covenant era, with its restrictive regulations and superficial cleansing rituals, and the “time of reformation” (v. 10) that has arrived with the coming of Christ. The old covenant’s earthly sanctuary was “but a shadow of the good things to come” (10:1), and with Christ’s appearance “the good things”—the new covenant’s better promises (8:6)—“have come” (9:11). Here a number of Greek manuscripts read “good things to come” (*mellontōn*), as in 10:1. Fewer but more reliable manuscripts read “good things that *have* come” (*genomenōn*; so ESV). This reading better fits the transition from the “not yet” OT situation (9:8–10) to the new era inaugurated by Christ’s appearance.

Christ’s ministry as High Priest is similar to but better than that of the OT high priest on the Day of Atonement (v. 9). As the high priest entered the Most Holy Place “once a year” (v. 7), so Christ entered the heavenly holy places “once for all” (v. 12). Of course, “once a year” imperfectly previewed “once for all,” since the OT high priest did so “repeatedly . . . every year” (9:25), and the sacrifices he offered were “a reminder of sins every year” (10:3). The ancient high priest passed through the first section of the tabernacle/temple (Holy Place) in order to enter the second (Most Holy Place). So also Christ “through the greater and more perfect tent [“section,” consistent with the sense of *skēnē* in 9:2, 3, 6, 7, 8] . . . entered . . . into the holy places.” As the high priest brought blood for his own and others’ sins, so Christ brought blood—not that of goats and calves but his own—to secure for others “eternal redemption.”

Our author uses a chiasm²⁵ to stress the contrasts:

25 William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), 237.

Christ

- (A) through the greater and more perfect tent
- (B) *not* made with hands, that is, *not* of this creation
- (B') *not* by means of the blood of goats and calves
- (A') but by means of his own blood

entered once for all into the holy places, thus securing an eternal redemption

God's heavenly sanctuary is envisioned as consisting of two chambers, like its earthly copy (8:5). Christ passed through the "greater and more perfect tent"—through the heavens (4:14)—to enter "the holy places," the heavenly Most Holy Place. Since the entryway into Christ's heavenly sanctuary was not made by human hands (unlike the tabernacle; Ex. 31:1–11), it is exempt from the mutability that besets the created universe (Heb. 1:10–12; 12:26–28; cf. Mark 14:58; Acts 7:48). By contrast, Judaism's second temple would lie in ruins, dismantled by Roman soldiers, only a few years after this sermon-letter of Hebrews was penned.

The superiority of Christ's sacrificial offering fits the sanctuary he has entered. "His own blood" surpasses the blood of goats and calves not only because animal deaths cannot atone for human sin (Heb. 10:4) but also because Christ's blood represents the suffering he personally endured as God incarnate in order to lead to glory God's many sons (2:10–12). Ancient Israel's high priest entered the Most Holy Place annually "with blood not his own" (9:25). Jesus suffered "to sanctify the people through his own blood" (13:12; cf. Acts 20:28).

Christ's ministry surpasses that of OT high priests with respect to its result as well: it secured "eternal redemption." Both "eternal" and "redemption" set Christ's ministry apart from that of previous high priests. Since his "once-for-all" sacrifice completely cleanses consciences, its purifying effectiveness is "eternal" (Heb. 10:3, 10–12). The Greek word behind "eternal" (*aiōnios*) refers not only to endless duration but also to participation in the "age to come," which will be better than the present age not merely quantitatively but also qualitatively (Heb. 6:5; cf. 2:5; 13:14; Matt. 12:32; Mark 10:30; Rom. 8:18; Eph. 1:21).

"Redemption" (*lytrōsis*) includes both forgiveness of sins and deliverance from sin's penalty, death, as shown in the appearance of a cognate term (*apolytrōsis*) in verse 15: "a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed." Sin not only disqualifies people from approaching God but also places them under his wrath. Redemption further includes liberation from enslavement (Luke 1:68–71; 2:38; 24:21; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 1:18). Christ achieved "age to come" redemption by dying to defeat the death-inflicting Devil and free the Devil's slaves (Heb. 2:14–15).

9:13–14 The superior achievement of Christ's sacrifice is now supported by another "lesser-to-greater" argument (cf. comment on 2:2–4): If slain animals' blood and ashes effected ceremonial purification of the *flesh* (9:9–10), how much more effective is Christ's blood for purifying worshipers' *consciences*, qualifying them to serve in God's presence! In addition to the shedding of goats' and bulls' blood for regular

sin offerings (Leviticus 4) and the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), our preacher mentions a purification ceremony involving “sprinkling . . . with the ashes of a heifer,” a rite to cleanse those ceremonially defiled by contact with a human corpse (Numbers 19). All these sacrificial animals were to be physically “without blemish” (*amōmon*) (Lev. 4:3, 23, 28, 32; Num. 19:2).

Christ “offered himself” as one not merely physically but also spiritually and morally “without blemish” (*amōmon*). Because he was “without sin” (Heb. 4:15), “holy, innocent, unstained” (7:26), he needed no sacrifice for his own sins (unlike the Levitical high priest; 5:2–3; 7:27) and could serve as the flawless substitute for others. He offered himself in death “through the eternal Spirit,” as God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit (1:8–9; Acts 10:38) for his redeeming task as royal Messiah and suffering servant (Luke 3:21, alluding to Ps. 2:7 and Isa. 42:1). The Spirit is “eternal” (*aiōnios*) not only because he is divine but also because his presence characterizes the age (*aiōn*) to come, manifested already in displays of new creation power (Heb. 2:4; 6:4–5).

Christ’s greater sacrifice accomplishes deeper purification—not merely of the flesh but also of the conscience. “Purify” (*katharizō*) appears in another expression of Jeremiah’s new covenant prophecy: “I will *cleanse* them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me” (Jer. 33:8 = LXX 40:8). For our preacher, “dead works” are violations of God’s law, which deserve death (Heb. 6:1; cf. 2:14–15; 10:26–31). Cleansing from sin’s pollution and penalty opens access to God’s presence, so that those who trust Christ may draw near to God with confidence (10:2, 9–14, 22). That we can now “serve the living God” in his Most Holy Place is implied by our author’s use of the worship-related verb “serve” (*latreuō*), related to the noun (*latreia*) used to describe the priests’ activities in the tabernacle (9:1, 6). He will apply the same term to our thankful worship (12:28). This is the second of four texts in which our preacher points out that we worship “the living God” (3:12; 10:31; 12:22; cf. 1 Thess. 1:9).

Response

The self-offering of Christ bestows on believers benefits beyond our capacity to fathom. His blood silences the charges of our own accusing, shame-shrouded conscience. He defeats and disarms Satan, who can no longer prosecute or enslave us by the fear of death. Yet Christ’s death does more than meet our need for “eternal redemption” through cleansing, forgiveness, and liberation. The goal of the redemption he secured is to bring us into God’s presence as priests consecrated “to serve the living God.” What more fitting response could there be than for those who are receiving an unshakable kingdom to “offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe” (12:28)?

HEBREWS 9:15–22

¹⁵Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.¹ ¹⁶For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. ¹⁷For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive. ¹⁸Therefore not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you.” ²¹And in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship. ²²Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

¹The Greek word means both *covenant* and *will*; also verses 16, 17

Section Overview: Covenant-Inaugurating Blood

The sacrificial bloodshed on the Day of Atonement showed that only a substitute’s death could sustain the covenant between the Lord and his sinning people. This covenant was a solemn commitment of all-encompassing, exclusive loyalty. To violate it meant incurring the curse of a violent, shameful death. This sanction was portrayed graphically when ancient covenants were ratified using slain animals’ carcasses and blood, illustrating the destruction that would befall covenant breakers. Moses used blood to inaugurate the first covenant at Sinai, but slain animals could not undergo God’s curse in the place of guilty humans. Only Christ’s death was able to avert the punishment our treason deserves and to secure for us the eternal inheritance we had forfeited.

Section Outline

- I. Christ’s death, redeeming the first covenant’s violators from death, secures their inheritance under the new covenant (9:15)
- II. Covenants are inaugurated through bloodshed to signify the lethal consequence of covenant violation (9:16–17)
 - A. Covenants are established when dead animals, symbolizing the covenant maker’s death, are brought forward (9:16–17a)
 - B. Covenants do not go into force until the covenant maker has bound himself to a commitment of loyalty or death (9:17b)

- III. Moses used bloodshed to inaugurate the first covenant, binding the Lord and Israel in a mutual commitment demanding loyalty or death (9:18–22)
 - A. He sprinkled the blood of the covenant on the Lord's book and on the people (9:18–20)
 - B. He sprinkled blood on the tent and the worship vessels (9:21–22)

Comment

9:15 Our author has spoken of Christ as the guarantor and mediator of a new covenant (7:22; 8:6–7). Then he discussed the old covenant's sanctuary and sacrifices and how Christ's entering the heavenly sanctuary with his own blood achieved our eternal redemption (9:1–14). But why are rituals involving death and bloodshed at the core of Israel's worship and of God's covenant (*diathēkē*)? The answer lies in the exclusive, comprehensive commitment the Lord imposed on his people by inaugurating a covenant relationship with them. Only two outcomes were possible. If covenant servants were faithful, they would be blessed ("eternal inheritance"). If not, they would endure curse ("death").

Moses elaborated these opposite alternatives in graphic detail in his farewell addresses to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 28). The gravity of the covenant mandated that a death had to occur in order for those who had transgressed its commandments to escape its curse. Yet the Israelites "did not continue in my covenant" (Heb. 8:9). They brought upon themselves the covenant's dire curses, including famine, violence, exile, disease, and death. They needed to be redeemed, which could occur only through the death of an innocent substitute, Christ, whose blood purified covenant breakers from their treasonous acts, which deserve death (9:14).

9:16–17 The ESV, like most versions and interpreters, gives the impression that the discussion shifts here suddenly, surprisingly, and briefly from biblical covenants (v. 15) to the administration of a last will and testament in the Greco-Roman legal system (vv. 16–17) and then back again to biblical covenants (vv. 18–20). (Although the NASB uses "covenant" to represent *diathēkē* in 9:16–17, its wording in verses 16–17 also describes the administration of a will after a testator's death.) This widespread interpretive tradition suggests that the mention of "inheritance" led the author to switch legal contexts, from covenants between living parties to a will involving stipulations to be implemented after the testator's death.²⁶ However, the term translated "covenant" in verses 15, 18 (*diathēkē*) is the same word translated "will" in verses 16–17. This Greek term did often mean "last will and testament" in Hellenistic extrabiblical literature, but *diathēkē* was also the term that the LXX typically used to represent the Hebrew word *berit* (covenant). Did our author, even though he was deeply influenced by the LXX and biblical categories, suddenly

²⁶ E.g., Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 28–29, 39–40; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 221–224; Johnson, *Hebrews*, 240.

“switch gears” to introduce a secular Hellenistic concept into his discussion of the relation of Jesus’ death to the transgressions of the first *diathēkē*?

Recent research into ancient Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants suggests that our author has the ratification rites of biblical covenants in view in verses 16–17. This interpretation certainly makes better sense (than the “will” view) of the *inferential links* between these verses and their context, and it also explains certain *peculiarities in the Greek wording*.²⁷ Consider first the *inferences* linking verses 16–17 to the preceding and following contexts. The conjunction “For” (*gar*) shows that verse 16, which binds *diathēkē* to death, supports the previous claim (v. 15) that a death has occurred to effect redemption from transgressions of the first *diathēkē*—the *covenant* established at Sinai. In verse 18 the opening “therefore” (*hothen*) indicates that the death-*diathēkē* connection described in general terms in verses 16–17 can be seen in the specific event of Moses’ sprinkling of “the blood of the covenant” to inaugurate the covenant at Sinai.

The *peculiar Greek wording* is smoothed out by the ESV: “The death of the one who made it *must be established*. For a will *takes effect only at death*.” That is a responsible interpretation. But a more literalistic rendering of the Greek would be, “The death of the one who made it *must be brought* [*phēresthai*]. For a *diathēkē* is *confirmed* [*bebaia*] *over dead things* [*epi nekrois*].” If a will is in view, the “bringing” of the testator’s death would presumably require evidence of his death (the ancient equivalent of modern death certificates), which would set in motion the settling of the estate. But this fails to explain the plural “dead things” (*nekrois*, which the ESV makes singular and abstract: “death”). If, however, verses 16–17 refer to covenant inauguration, the covenant maker’s “death” is brought in the animal carcasses symbolizing his self-maledictory oath and the curse to befall him if he breaks the covenant. Covenant ratification rituals involving slain, split carcasses are described in Genesis 15:8–21 (where the Lord invoked covenant curse on himself) and Jeremiah 34:8–20 (where Jews who broke their covenant commitment brought upon themselves the cursed death symbolized by animal carcasses through which they had passed).

The final clause of verse 17, “It is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive,” is difficult for both the “will” interpretation and the “covenant” interpretation of *diathēkē*. In the ancient world, as in our day, a will was “in force” as a legal document as soon as it was certified by a testator. Only the execution of its stipulations regarding the distribution of the estate awaited the testator’s death. If, however, *diathēkē* means “covenant” in verses 16–17 (as well as in the surrounding verses), this clause of verse 17 would mean that the covenant is not ratified until the covenant maker has taken the self-maledictory oath, committing himself to maintain loyalty—or face violent death. One scholar writes, “The formulation accurately reflects the legal situation that a covenant is never secured until the ratifier has bound himself to his oath by means of a representative death.”²⁸

27 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 138–144; John J. Hughes, “Hebrews IX 15ff. and Galatians III 15ff.: A Study in Covenant Practice and Procedure,” *NovT* 21 (1979): 27–96; Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 242–243. Cf. O’Brien, *Hebrews*, 328–332.

28 Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 243.

9:18–20 The ratification of the Sinai covenant illustrates the principle of verses 16–17: entering into covenant with the living God is deadly, dangerous business! A chiasmic structure binds the description of Sinai's covenant inauguration (vv. 18–20) and the consecration of its sanctuary (vv. 21–22)—both by blood:

- (A) Not . . . without blood
- (B) according to the law
- (C) he sprinkled
- (D) this is the blood of the covenant
- (C') he sprinkled
- (B') according to the law
- (A') without the shedding of blood²⁹

Although the ritual of passing between animal carcasses is not mentioned in connection with the inauguration of the covenant at Sinai, the sprinkling of sacrificial blood at that ceremony served to symbolize the lethal consequences that would ensue in the event of a breach of commitment. Unlike the covenant with Abraham, in which the Lord alone bore the obligation to secure his servant's blessedness, at Sinai blood was sprinkled both on the people and on objects representing the Lord (Ex. 24:3–8). The Exodus account states that Moses threw half of the blood of slain animals on the Lord's altar, read from the book of the law, and then sprinkled the rest of the blood on the people who had vowed to observe “all that the LORD has spoken.” Hebrews says that the blood was sprinkled on the book itself and on the people. Both texts speak of the blood being applied to the people, which is our preacher's point: at Sinai, Israel bound themselves to keep the Lord's covenant or else face a violent death under his curse.

Hebrews mentions other features (goats as well as calves, water, scarlet wool, hyssop) that do not appear in Exodus 24. The author and his readers may have known of oral traditions not preserved in Scripture. The blood of both calves and goats was integral to the Day of Atonement ritual (Heb. 9:12; cf. Leviticus 16). The mention of features involved in other cleansing rituals (Leviticus 14; Numbers 19) may underscore the pervasiveness of the people's defilement. Moses' announcement, “This is the blood of the covenant that God commanded for you” (cf. Ex. 24:8), was appropriated by Jesus when he instituted the Lord's Supper: “This is *my* blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28).

9:21–22 The tent (tabernacle) was to be the dwelling place of the holy covenant Lord. Yet the tent and its furnishings had been crafted by the hands of those same covenant-breaking, defiled, death-deserving servants. Therefore the sanctuary itself and its equipment needed ceremonial purification, as did the people. Our author stresses the use of blood in the consecration of the tent and its contents, although Exodus also prescribed the use of a specially formulated sacred anointing oil

²⁹ So O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 327, citing K. Backhaus, *Der Neue Bund und das Werden der Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1996), 185.

(Ex. 30:22–33; 40:9–10). Blood was used to “atone for” the incense altar in the Most Holy Place (Ex. 30:1–10) and, with the holy oil, to consecrate the altar for burnt offerings in the courtyard (Lev. 8:15).

The widespread use of blood (and a heifer’s ashes, also from a victim’s violent death) in the procedures of the old covenant’s sanctuary served only for the purification of the flesh and could not reach the conscience (Heb. 9:9–10). Yet those rites announced a truth transcending their own effects: in order for sinful people to be redeemed from covenant curses, they need a full and free forgiveness that wipes their sullied record clean. They need the God of justice, who does not merely excuse breaches of his covenant, to fulfill his promise that he “will remember their sins no more” (8:12). Such forgiveness cannot occur “without the shedding of blood,” and the only blood that can wash clean our stained consciences is “the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19).

Response

Contemporary Christians may be inclined toward a casual, consumerist approach to religious “commitments.” To those with this mind-set, faith in Christ may seem to be one of several potential solutions to personal problems that are worth “giving a try.” If it does not “work” or it stops “working,” or if something more interesting comes along, one may move on with little sense of loss. The world of biblical covenants that Hebrews summarizes takes our relationship with God far more seriously. We have heard a terrifying warning about the danger of irreversible apostasy (Heb. 6:4–8). Now we confront the life-or-death consequences of entering into covenant with the living God, who is not to be trifled with or just “given a try.” At Sinai the Israelites were shown a bloody preview of the death they would die if they spurned their divine husband. Yet their loyalty lasted no longer than ours often does. Our Hebrews preacher calls us to deep seriousness and to high joy: *seriousness* because transgressors of God’s holy commands deserve utter ruin at his hands, but *joy* because God sent his Son as High Priest and blameless sacrifice in order to redeem us from ruin by bearing wrath in our place and to bestow upon us an eternal inheritance.

HEBREWS 9:23–28

²³ Thus it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴ For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. ²⁵ Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, ²⁶ for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. ²⁷ And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, ²⁸ so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

Section Overview: Christ's Heavenly Sanctuary and Final Sacrifice

In the theology of Hebrews, covenant, sacrifice, and sanctuary are interrelated in both the old covenant and the new. The blood of sacrifices was integral to the inauguration of the old covenant, for that blood illustrated the life-or-death sanctions that reward loyalty and punish infidelity (9:15–20). Sacrificial blood was used to consecrate the OT sanctuary and its equipment, purging the pollution they absorbed from sinful human artisans (9:21–22). Thenceforth the sanctuary was the Holy Place where priests offered sacrifices to atone for worshipers' sins, maintaining their communion with the Lord by averting his covenant curse.

Having surveyed this relationship with respect to the first covenant's earthly sanctuary and sacrifices (9:16–22), our author now turns to the new covenant's heavenly sanctuary and Christ's role as mediator of this new covenant (cf. 9:15). Christ's single self-sacrifice sustains our covenant communion with God. Two marks of its superiority are highlighted: (a) Christ's blood consecrates heaven itself (not a handmade copy thereof) as the sanctuary where we approach God (9:23–24); (b) Christ entered this sanctuary once (not repeatedly) to atone for the sins of many (9:25–28). This section elaborates the themes of 9:11–12: Christ entered a sanctuary not belonging to the created universe, he did so once for all, he brought his own blood (not that of goats and calves), and thus he secured eternal redemption.

Section Outline

- I. Christ's blood has purified the heavenly sanctuary, the venue of our worship (9:23–24)

- A. The handmade tent, a copy of the heavenly sanctuary, was purified by animals' blood; so the heavenly sanctuary had to be purified by a better sacrifice: Christ's blood (9:23)
- B. Christ, our Great High Priest, represents us in God's presence (9:24)
- II. Christ accomplished his priestly mission once for all (9:25–28)
 - A. Unlike the Levitical high priest, Christ did not enter the Most Holy Place repeatedly, but once at the climax of the ages to remove sin by sacrificing himself (9:25–26)
 - B. As every human faces two milestones, so does Christ (9:27–28)
 - 1. Every human dies once, and afterward faces judgment (9:27)
 - 2. Christ has died once for others' sins, and afterward will return to save them (9:28)

Comment

9:23–24 Verse 22 connected the purification (*katharizō*) of handmade instruments of worship and the forgiveness of human sins. This link makes sense of the consecration of the *earthly* tabernacle and its furnishings through blood. The products of defiled human hands had to be purged in order to serve as God's holy residence. Such cleansing required bloodshed, the prerequisite for the forgiveness of sins. Now our preacher's "how much more" argument takes a surprising turn: If animal sacrifices were needed to purify the handmade earthly tent, how much greater are the sacrifices needed to purify "the heavenly things themselves," the Most Holy Place "not . . . made with hands" (v. 24, echoing v. 11)! This reasoning is consistent with the sermon's pervasive theme: Christ and the new covenant surpass in every way God's prior provision for his people (1:1–4; 2:1–4; 3:5–6; 4:14–5:10; 7:1–28; 8:6–13; 9:11–14; etc.). The "better sacrifices" refer to the one, unrepeatable self-offering of Christ himself, the innocent High Priest and sacrificial victim "without blemish."

But why would "heaven itself," untouched by human hands and undefiled by human sin, need "to be purified" (*katharizō*)? Perhaps the reference to "the heavenly things themselves" points not only to God's heavenly sanctuary but also to the people destined to worship there. To be sure, since the tabernacle and its contents were "copies [*hypodeigmata*] of the heavenly things," those "heavenly things" must refer to the transcendent Most Holy Place, which Moses beheld on the mountain (8:5). Yet the tabernacle's consecration by blood was bound up with the forgiveness of worshipers who meet God there (9:22). This suggests that the "heavenly things" purified by Christ's sacrifice may be the people of God, pictured as his living sanctuary.³⁰ The imagery of God's people as his dwelling place appears elsewhere in the NT (1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:20–22; 1 Pet. 2:4–8). In Hebrews such imagery appeared when Jesus' greater glory was compared to that of "the builder of a house," followed by the statement, "We are his house" (Heb. 3:3, 6).

³⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 228–229; O'Brien, *Hebrews*, 336–338.

However we construe the purification of “the heavenly things,” the preacher’s point is to reassert that Christ’s high priestly ministry occurs not in an earthly replica of God’s true sanctuary (8:5) but in “heaven itself.” Every high priest offers sacrifices for sins (5:1), so Christ needed “something to offer” (8:3). He offered himself to purify others of their sins (7:27; 9:11–14). These statements have prepared us for this decisive moment in redemptive history, the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement as the Great High Priest enters into the heavenly Most Holy Place.

9:25–26 The author explores the contrast between the repeated (*pollakis* in both verses) sacrifices offered by Levitical high priests and Christ’s once-for-all (*hapax*; v. 27) sacrifice of himself. The mention of the high priest’s entering the holy places “with blood not his own” shows that the Day of Atonement is in view. Previously, the infrequency of the high priest’s access to the Most Holy Place (“but once a year”) was cited to show that the way into God’s true sanctuary was not revealed under the old covenant (vv. 7–8). The once-a-year ministry of the Levitical high priest did, however, prefigure the once-for-all (*ephapax*) entrance of Christ into the heavenly Most Holy Place (v. 12).

From a different perspective, the fact that the Day of Atonement ritual took place over and over, year after year, showed that Levitical rites could never remove defilement from human consciences. If “the blood of bulls and goats” could take away sins, they would not have been “offered every year” (10:1–4). Christ brought infinitely more costly blood when he entered once for all into the heavenly Most Holy Place. Whereas the Levitical high priest presented “blood not his own,” that of slain goats and calves (9:12), Christ put “away sin by the sacrifice of *himself*” (v. 26) when he was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (v. 28).

Because Christ’s offering was his own death, it is unthinkable that he would undergo this suffering “repeatedly [*pollakis*] since the foundation of the world.” Rather, he appeared “at the end of the ages [*epi synteleia tōn aiōnōn*],” the climactic moment in redemptive history. Christ’s incarnation, ministry, death, and exaltation form the complex of events marking the arrival of “the last days” (1:1–2; Acts 2:17) and “the end of the ages [*ta telē tōn aiōnōn*]” (1 Cor. 10:11; cf. Matt. 13:39–40).

9:27–28 General human experience further demonstrates that Christ’s sacrificial death could occur only once. The observation that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” refutes Eastern religions’ belief in reincarnation and Western materialism’s belief that physical death annihilates human beings’ personal existence. But our preacher’s real purpose is to draw a parallel to Christ’s experience. Others’ deaths will be followed by the last judgment (Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11–15). Christ, who died “to bear the sins of many” as the suffering servant (Isa. 53:4–5, 11–12), “will appear a second time,” just as on the Day of Atonement the Levitical high priest emerged from the Most Holy Place after sprinkling blood on the mercy seat (Lev. 16:12–19;

Heb. 9:4–5). When Christ emerges from the heavenly sanctuary, he will appear a second time not for judgment, as in the case of fellow humans, but to bring the fullness of “salvation” to those who eagerly await him (cf. Rom. 8:19–25; 1 Cor. 1:7; Gal. 5:5; Phil. 3:20). The “salvation” that the Lord first announced to his apostles (Heb. 2:3) included not only the forgiveness of sins but also dominion in the world to come (2:5). Christ’s return in glory will complete his people’s salvation.

Response

This text reveals truths about Christ that elicit confident assurance and eager expectation. First, Christ now appears “in the presence of God on our behalf.” He has carried the sacrificial blood he himself shed on the cross, when he died the death we deserve for breaking God’s covenant. Because his blood “puts away sin,” purifying our conscience, we “have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). Our privileged place in the history of redemption, the era in which Jesus has opened the way into God’s sanctuary, should move us to “draw near . . . in full assurance of faith” through prayer and worship (10:22).

Second, Christ “will appear a second time.” The certainty of his second coming must move us to “eagerly [wait] for him.” Although daily duties and creature comforts often focus our attention on the present, knowing that our High Priest will return, bringing complete salvation, lifts our sights and stirs our longings: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

HEBREWS 10:1–10

10 For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ²Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

⁵Consequently, when Christ¹ came into the world, he said,

“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
but a body have you prepared for me;

⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure.

⁷ Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

⁸When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), ⁹then he added, “Behold, I have come to do your will.” He does away with the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹Greek *he*

Section Overview: Repeated Animal Sacrifices Replaced by Christ's Once-for-All Offering

The superiority of Christ's sacrifice to the atonement provisions of the old covenant is shown in three ways: (1) The law's sacrifices were a shadow, not the substance, of the real means of cleansing from sin. (2) The annual repetition of the Day of Atonement sacrifices implied that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sins. (3) Christ's words in Psalm 40:6–8 identify two ways to receive forgiveness, the first (the deaths of animals) ineffective and destined to be replaced by the second, Christ's offering his human body to fulfill God's will. Christ's self-offering has sanctified our consciences once for all.

Section Outline

- I. The annual repetition of the law's sacrifices shows that they cannot purify consciences (10:1–4)
 - A. The law presented a shadow, not the substance, of the good things that were to come in the new covenant (10:1a)
 - B. The law's Day of Atonement sacrifices could not cleanse worshipers' consciences (10:1b–4)
 1. If those sacrifices had cleansed consciences, they would not have needed to be repeated (10:1b–2)
 2. Those sacrifices were annual reminders, not removers, of sin's defilement (10:3)
 3. The deaths of bulls and goats cannot atone for humans' sins (10:4)
- II. As he entered the world, Christ announced that he was replacing OT sacrifices by his own obedience to God's will through offering his body (10:5–10)
 - A. The words of Psalm 40 are the words of the incarnate Christ (10:5a)
 - B. Psalm 40:6–8 contrasts sacrificed animals that do not please God to Christ's performance of God's will (10:5b–7)
 - C. Psalm 40:6–8 announced that Christ's obedience would replace the law's sacrificial system (10:8–10)
 1. Although God's law commanded animal sacrifices, their deaths did not win his pleasure toward worshipers (10:8)

2. Christ's coming to do God's will replaced the law's sacrifices (10:9)
3. Christ did God's will by offering his body once for all, sanctifying us (10:10)

Comment

10:1–4 On Mount Sinai God showed Moses his heavenly sanctuary and directed him to construct the tabernacle after that pattern; thus it was “a copy and shadow [*skia*] of the heavenly things” (Heb. 8:5, citing Ex. 25:40). Likewise, the sacrifices ordered by the law were “but a shadow [*skia*] of the good things to come” and not “the true form [*eikōn*]” of those realities (10:1). In Colossians 2:16–17 Paul makes a similar point: the law's regulations were a “shadow of the things to come [*skia tōn mellontōn*],” whereas “the substance belongs to Christ.” The contrast between shadow and substantial reality is not ontological (immaterial vs. physical), as in Platonic dualism. Rather, the contrast is historical and eschatological. Because the law and its rituals belonged to an earlier era, they traced the silhouette of a better mode of atonement that was, at that time, still “to come.”

The annual Day of Atonement ritual has already been contrasted to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice and entrance into the heavenly sanctuary (Heb. 9:25–28). Now our author argues that this year-by-year repetition demonstrates that the blood of bulls and goats cannot “perfect” worshipers (10:1) by removing sin's guilt (10:4). Again the plurality characterizing old covenant institutions shows their imperfection (cf. 1:1–2; 7:23–25). Now the repetition of animal sacrifices year by year on the Day of Atonement testifies to their inability to cleanse worshipers' consciences of sin's stain.

The terms “make perfect” (*teleiōō*), “cleansed” (*katharizō*, sometimes “purify” in ESV), and “sanctified” (*hagiazō*) (10:1–2, 10) are complementary ways of describing the results of forgiveness, namely, the purification of conscience that qualifies worshipers to “draw near” to God. This “perfection” could never be achieved by the Levitical priesthood, for the law “made nothing perfect” and thus could not enable sin-stained people to “draw near to God” (7:19; cf. 7:11; 9:9). Whereas slain animals' blood could “sanctify” and “purify” the flesh, only Christ's blood could purify the human conscience (9:13–14). Rather than removing sin's defilement from the conscience, the slain bulls constituted a “reminder of sins every year” (10:3). Numbers 5:15 spoke of an “offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance” in connection with a rite to address suspicions of adultery. Our preacher's point is broader: again and again the Day of Atonement sacrifices brought Israelites' sins to their minds and “reminded” the Lord of their guilt. Only with the new covenant's arrival would the Lord “remember their sins no more” (Heb. 8:12; 10:17, citing Jer. 31:34).

The “blood of bulls and goats” (Heb. 10:4) was central to the Day of Atonement liturgy (9:12–13). The high priest first entered the Most Holy Place with the blood of a bull to atone for his own sin and that of his family (Lev. 16:6–14). Then he emerged to slay a goat and return to God's presence with its blood to atone for the

people (Lev. 16:5–9). The mention of bulls' blood thus first reinforces the point that Levitical high priests were sinners needing atonement before they could intercede for others (Heb. 5:2–3; 7:26–27; 9:7).

Second, the shedding of animals' blood on the Day of Atonement demonstrated that "the blood of bulls and goats" could not remove sins, for otherwise it would have been performed only once, not yearly. The question remains of why animal victims cannot die to atone for human sinners. Our preacher has already answered: those enslaved by the Devil could be saved only by a Rescuer who shared their flesh and blood, so that through his own death he might destroy the Devil's power to inflict death (2:14–15).

10:5–7 The citation of Psalm 40:6–8 (LXX 39:7–9) is introduced as the words Christ spoke to God the Father as he "came into the world" at the incarnation. In John 11:27 Martha confessed that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world." At his incarnation, the Son received the "body . . . prepared" for him (Heb. 10:5), henceforth partaking of the flesh and blood his brothers and children share (Heb. 2:10–14). Here in Hebrews 10:5, "world" represents a different Greek word (*kosmos*) from that used in 1:6 and 2:5 to refer to the glorious realm of the age to come (*oikoumenē*). Here the "world" is our sin-cursed world (cf. 11:7, 38), in which Christ would fulfill God's will by sacrificing the body prepared for him.

Psalm 40 is one of several OT texts affirming that what God seeks from his people is not the sacrificial slaughter of animals but loyalty, integrity, mercy, and obedience (1 Sam. 15:22; Pss. 50:12–16; 51:16–17; Isa. 1:11–17; Jer. 7:22–23; Hos. 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8). These warnings against formalism refute the assumption that sacrificial rituals will placate God's righteous wrath regardless of the state of worshipers' hearts. But our preacher views Psalm 40 in a wider perspective, as a timeline of redemptive history that has progressed chronologically from a defective sacrificial system to the final sacrifice offered by Christ. Our author's interpretation of Psalm 40, in Hebrews 10:8–10, will therefore unpack his redemptive-historical reading of the psalm.

The citation in Hebrews of Psalm 40:6–8 follows the wording of the main LXX manuscripts with minor variations. English readers who compare Psalm 40:6–8 to its citation in Hebrews 10:5–7 will note two differences: First, English versions translate the Hebrew original of Psalm 40:6 along the lines of "You have given me an open ear" (ESV). The author of Hebrews, following the textual tradition reflected in the major LXX manuscripts, reads, "A body have you prepared for me." The origin of the LXX's departure from the Hebrew original is uncertain. Perhaps the Greek translators understood "open ears" as representative of the whole body, offered in obedience to God's voice. The reading "body" (*sōma*) serves our author's point, as we see in his explanation of the psalm, which addresses "the offering of the body [*soma*] of Jesus Christ once for all" (10:10). Second, the ESV rearranges the word order of verse 7 from that of both the OT Hebrew and the LXX of Psalm 40:7–8 (39:8–9), as well as the Greek of Hebrews 10:7:

Hebrew and LXX of Psalm 40:7–8 (39:8–9); Greek of Hebrews 10:7:

Then I said, “Behold I have come,
in the scroll of the book it is written of me: . . .
to do your will, O God.”

ESV of Hebrews 10:7:

Then I said, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.”

The rearrangement makes the ESV flow smoothly, without the interruption of the parenthetical comment “in the scroll of the book it is written of me.” But this change perhaps minimizes the striking declaration, “Then I said, ‘Behold, *I have come!*’” That announcement was foreshadowed in the introduction to this citation: “When Christ *came* into the world, he said . . .” (Heb. 10:5). The “then” opening verse 7 signals the temporal transition from the era of the law to the era of the new covenant that dawned when Christ entered the world to do God’s will.

The citation is structured in two couplets of lines in antithetical parallelism. The first line of each couplet expresses God’s disfavor toward animal sacrifices (vv. 5b, 6). In the second line of each couplet, the speaker presents himself as a positive alternative to the (rejected) sacrifices: God has prepared a body for him, and with that body he will do God’s will (vv. 5c, 7):

Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, (v. 5b) . . .
in burnt offerings and sin offerings
you have taken no pleasure. (v. 6)

but a body have you prepared for me; (v. 5c) . . .
Then I said, “Behold, I have come to do your will, O God,
as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.” (v. 7)

10:8–10 In his interpretation our preacher sorts the features of the psalm citation, connecting like with like. From the first lines of the couplets he draws together four terms describing animal sacrifices: “sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings.” Their concentration emphasizes how *numerous* those old covenant offerings were. Then the verbs expressing God’s displeasure are united (“You have neither desired nor taken pleasure”). This pairing makes the point that, in God’s estimation, the blood of bulls and goats was never sufficient to take away sins.

Although our preacher is citing Holy Scripture, some might misconstrue his strong assertion that God *disapproves* of animal sacrifices. He therefore acknowledges that “these [animal sacrifices] are offered according to the law”—the message God spoke to Moses (2:2; 3:3–5; 8:5; 12:18–21). God himself instituted that first covenant at Sinai, yet that covenant was not faultless (8:7–13) since “the law made nothing perfect” (7:19). The first covenant, with its sanctuary and sacrifices, was destined to be replaced by a new and better covenant (8:6). The psalm’s “then”

reappears (10:9) to signal that the new covenant, with its better means of removing sin's defilement, has appeared in history in the Son who announced, "Behold, I have come to do your will." By his coming, Christ "does away with the first"—the first covenant, with its earthly sanctuary and slain animals (9:1)—"in order to establish the second" means of atonement and access, which is God's "will" (*thelēma*) for the complete, conscience-deep cleansing of his people—in contrast to the ineffective animal sacrifices that "you have not desired [*thelō*]" (10:5).

The key terms "will" and "body" from Psalm 40 reappear as the author concludes his interpretation. The will of God that Jesus Christ came into the world to accomplish was his offering of the body prepared for him—the flesh and blood he now shared with his children (Heb. 2:14)—as the sacrifice that could remove our sinful pollution once for all. Christ was "without sin" throughout his life (4:15); but here our preacher focuses on God's specific redemptive purpose leading Jesus to the cross, the will to which he submitted in Gethsemane when he "offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death" (5:7; cf. Mark 14:34–36). Every high priest approaches God with gifts and sacrifices (Heb. 8:3), but only Jesus offered himself, the body he shares with his human brothers, to atone for their sin.

Christ's self-offering in death "sanctified" his people "once for all" (cf. also 7:27; 9:12, 26, 28). Unlike later theologians, the author to the Hebrews typically uses the verb "sanctify" (*hagiazō*) to refer not to the lifelong process of the Holy Spirit's subjective transformation of believers' character to conform us to Christ's holiness (e.g., 1 Thess. 5:23; cf. Heb. 12:14) but rather to a *status* of blameless purity. This status is conferred immediately on believers through forgiveness of sins, qualifying them to enter God's holy presence with confidence (2:11; 9:13; 10:14, 29; 13:12).

Response

The first response this passage should elicit is a firm confidence that Christ's self-sacrifice has perfected, purified, and sanctified us once for all, removing sin's stain from our consciences and enabling us to draw near to God in worship. What the blood of bulls and goats, offered repeatedly according to God's law, could never do, Jesus has done fully and finally by offering his body for us on the cross. God ordained those animal victims to be a "shadow," prefiguring the true atonement accomplished by Christ. Our preacher urged his original audience not to turn away from Jesus to a system God himself had instituted, preliminarily and temporarily. All the more, then, we must not seek cleansing of conscience anywhere other than in Christ alone.

A second response flows from our trust in Jesus. He came into the world to do God's will—the unique redemptive mission the Father had assigned him—obeying from a heart captivated by God's word (Ps. 40:8). So for us the new covenant blessing that God "will remember their sins no more" (Heb. 8:12) carries with it another blessing, reshaping our hearts in the image of our Savior: "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts" (8:10). Full forgiveness granted freely draws us close to God and moves us to eager obedience.

HEBREWS 10:11–18

¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ¹ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

¹⁶ “This is the covenant that I will make with them
after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws on their hearts,
and write them on their minds,”

¹⁷ then he adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

¹⁸ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

¹Greek *this one*

Section Overview: Christ's Atoning Mission Completed

The central section of Hebrews (4:14–10:31) demonstrates first why Christ's priestly *office* is better than that of Aaron and the Levitical priests (4:14–7:28), and then why Christ's priestly *ministry* surpasses theirs (8:1–10:31). Our preacher now draws his instruction on these themes to a close (10:11–18) before issuing an exhortation summoning his hearers to respond appropriately to their Great High Priest's ministry (10:19–31). One more contrast sets Jesus' atoning sacrifice above the ministry of the Levitical priests: the priests stand daily to make offerings repeatedly, whereas Jesus has been seated at God's right hand, his atoning work finished forever. Through his superior priesthood Christ mediates a new and better covenant (8:6), so the preacher's exploration of the motifs of covenant, sanctuary, and sacrifice concludes (10:15–18) where it began (8:7–13): with the new covenant promises of Jeremiah 31:31–34.

Section Outline

- I. Christ's seated posture at God's right hand confirms that he has completed his sacrificial mission for all time (10:11–14)
 - A. Levitical priests stand every day, repeatedly offering sacrifices that cannot remove sin (10:11)

- B. Christ offered a single sacrifice that removes sins for all time (10:12a)
 - C. Now Christ is the king addressed in Psalm 110:1 (10:12b–13)
 - 1. He sits at God's right hand (10:12b)
 - 2. He is waiting for the subjugation of his enemies (10:13)
 - D. Christ made a single offering that perfects his people for all time (10:14)
- II. The Holy Spirit testifies that Christ has enacted the new covenant's promises (10:15–18)
- A. God is putting his word into his people's hearts (10:15–16)
 - B. God has forgiven his people's sins forever, making further sacrifice for sin unnecessary (10:17–18)

Comment

10:11 When surveying the features of the law's earthly sanctuary above (9:1–10), our author mentioned the *daily* ministries of many priests in its first section (the Holy Place) and the high priest's *yearly* ministry (Day of Atonement) in the inner section (the Most Holy Place). He then discussed why the sacrificial blood presented by high priests "repeatedly" (*pollakis*; 9:25) on the Day of Atonement could not cleanse worshipers' consciences, as Christ's sacrifice has done once for all (9:11–10:10). Now the discussion returns to the *daily* ministry conducted by the ordinary priests.

Inside the Holy Place, the priests attended to the lampstand and offered incense on a daily basis, and weekly they replaced the bread of the Presence (Ex. 25:30; 27:20–21; 30:6–8). On the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard, priests sacrificed two year-old lambs each day (one in the morning and another in the evening; Ex. 29:38–46; Num. 28:1–8). These animal sacrifices, offered "frequently" (*pollakis*), are in view here. They were frequent, many, and redundant ("*the same* sacrifices") because they could never take away sins. Their inability to atone for sins or cleanse consciences was demonstrated by the priests' posture as they performed their acts of worship: those Levitical priests always *stood* (Deut. 18:5) because their work was never finished; the sacrifices they offered could never remove the guilt of sin.

10:12–14 In contrast to the Levitical priests, who perpetually stood to perform repetitive and ultimately ineffective service, Jesus "sat down at the right hand of God." His enthronement is the result of his having offered "for all time" (*eis to diēnekes*; also in 7:3) a "single sacrifice." The terms "for all time" and "single" will reappear in verse 14, so they function as bookends (an *inclusio*) surrounding and unifying this further argument for the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice. At its center (vv. 12b–13) this argument revisits Psalm 110:1, enlisting its testimony to clinch the case that Christ has completed forever the removal of sin's stain from our consciences.

Psalm 110:1 reads, "The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Jesus appealed to this passage to challenge

his critics' assumption that the Messiah, whom David calls "my Lord," would be merely human (Matt. 22:41–45). This text is the source of NT passages teaching that Christ is now "at the right hand" of God in heaven (Matt. 26:64; Acts 2:33–36; 5:31; 7:55–56; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20). Paul alludes to this verse in 1 Corinthians 15:25–26, declaring that the risen Christ must reign until all his enemies—the last of which is death (cf. Rev. 20:7–14)—are subjected under his feet.

In Hebrews, Psalm 110:1 has been alluded to in the prologue (Heb. 1:3) and in the series of OT passages demonstrating the Son's superiority to angels (1:13). The Son's enthronement "at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven" shows that his priestly ministry is conducted not in an earthly sanctuary but in "the true tent that the Lord set up" (8:1–2). Here in 10:12 our attention is drawn to Jesus' posture: having offered the single sacrifice that finally removes sins, "he *sat down*" at God's right hand. The prologue had profiled the two phases of the Son's redemptive mission: "After making purification for sins, he sat down" (1:3). Later our author will encourage us to stay steadfast under suffering by directing our sight to Jesus and his two phases of ministry as mediator: he "*endured* the cross, despising the shame, and *is seated* at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2; cf. Luke 24:26; 1 Pet. 1:11).

Just as believers are awaiting Christ's reappearance from heaven (Heb. 9:28), so he himself is waiting "until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet." His death has already neutralized the Devil, "who has the power of death," and has freed us from slavery to the fear of death (2:14–15). The blood of the Lamb has deprived that accuser of his right to press charges against us (Rev. 12:10–11). But both NT Scripture and Christian experience show that Christ's archenemy and many lesser enemies still resist his rule and assault his people (Eph. 4:27; 6:11; 1 Pet. 5:8). Only in "the world to come" will everything be subjected under Christ's feet. Even though he is already "crowned with glory and honor," we "do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (Heb. 2:5–9; cf. 1 Cor. 15:25–28).

Because Christ's "single sacrifice for sins" achieved the forgiveness that animal deaths could never provide (Heb. 10:12), his "single offering" results in the "perfecting" and "sanctifying" of those who draw near to God through him (10:14). Throughout Hebrews, "perfect" (*teleiōō*) carries the sense it acquired in the LXX, expressing the consecration qualifying priests (and other worshipers) to approach God's presence in worship (cf. comment on 2:10). Although he was sinless, Christ was "perfected"—that is, "designated by God a high priest"—through his suffering (5:8–10; 2:10; 7:28). All others, stained by sin, can only be "perfected"—purified of defilement to draw near in worship—when their sins are atoned for and their consciences purified from pollution (7:19; 9:11; 10:1).

Although "are being sanctified" gives the impression of referring to the Holy Spirit's progressive transformation of Christians' character, the phrase is better understood as describing the holy standing conferred immediately on believers when their consciences are cleansed, once for all, by Christ's atoning blood (cf. comment on 10:8–10). Under the OT law, animals' blood "sanctified" for the puri-

fication of the flesh so that those previously defiled could thereafter rejoin Israel's worshiping community (9:13). So also Christ's single sacrifice for sins has cleansed our consciences and consecrated us as holy priests, once for all and for all time.

10:15 God's word itself supports this conclusion, since the Holy Spirit "bears witness [*martyreō*] to us" in the new covenant prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31–34, previously cited in Hebrews 8:7–12. The Holy Spirit speaks in Scripture not only in the remote past, when the word came through prophets (Heb. 1:1), but also in the present, as he still speaks through those ancient texts to new covenant believers. For instance, Psalm 95, penned by David, is what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in our "today" (Heb. 3:7). The old covenant's regulations restricting access to the tabernacle were the Holy Spirit's way of demonstrating that the way into God's presence had not yet arrived (9:8). Through the OT, God bears witness (*martyreō*) on behalf of Jesus (Heb. 7:8, 17) and on behalf of ancient saints who responded to God's promises in active faith (11:2, 4–5, 39). Now the Spirit speaks his testimony in the new covenant promises delivered through Jeremiah.

10:16–17 Having cited Jeremiah's prophecy more fully in 8:7–12, our author selects two of the new covenant's "better promises" to conclude his case for the superiority of this covenant, of which Christ is mediator (8:6).

First, God will put his laws into his people's hearts. The contrast with the covenant at Sinai, which the Israelites broke, is made explicit by Paul when he describes the Spirit of the living God writing his message "not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3). The author of Hebrews has contrasted cleansing rituals that touch only the flesh with the conscience-purifying effectiveness of Christ's blood (Heb. 9:9–10, 13–14). It is not that believers merely imagine that they are presently sinless; rather, their sin's defilement has been removed and no longer obstructs their communion with God.

Yet the writing of God's laws into our hearts also includes the Holy Spirit's transformation of our motivations, affections, and desires so that "the thoughts and intentions of the heart," always visible to God (4:12), begin to conform to the heart of Jesus, who said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:6–8, cited partially in Heb. 10:7). When our author quotes Psalm 110:1 and 4 (as he repeatedly does), he may intend to evoke also the intervening verses, which state this promise in other words: "Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments." (Ps. 110:3).

Second, God "will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." Whereas the Day of Atonement sacrifices were a "reminder of sins every year" (Heb. 10:3), under the new covenant God will no longer keep sinners' offenses in mind; he will no longer relate to them in terms of their sin and guilt but rather will welcome them as holy through the purification they have received from Christ. Jeremiah 31:34 is one of several OT texts that portray God's forgiveness as his refusal to "remember sins" (Pss. 25:7; 79:8; Isa. 43:25; 64:9; Ezek. 18:22; contrast

Jer. 14:10). Instead of our sins, God “remembers” his mercy and his steadfast love (Ps. 25:6) through Christ, the mediator of the new covenant.

10:18 The closing comment underscores the importance of God’s commitment to “remember their sins . . . no more” because of Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice. His full and free forgiveness means that no further offering for sin is needed. Christ’s single sacrifice ended all the animal bloodshed God’s law had mandated for the era of anticipation (10:8–9).

Response

Christ’s seated posture at God’s right hand confirms that his one sacrifice forgives sin, cleanses the conscience, and grants access to the presence of God. From now on no sacrifice for sin, other than Christ’s completed death on the cross, has any standing in God’s eyes. The following exhortation will show that this truth has both encouraging and sobering implications. We will be encouraged to enter God’s heavenly sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, since our hearts are “sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (10:19, 22). On the other hand, we dare not turn away from Jesus, for apart from him “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (10:26). The covenant he mediates imparts the inseparable twin blessings of once-for-all forgiveness and powerful transformation of heart, making us willing and able to obey God’s law. As we rest in the sufficiency of Christ’s blood to remove our guilt, we will submit gladly to his heavenly reign. We trust and obey.

OVERVIEW OF

HEBREWS 10:19–35

The exhortation that flows from the superiority of Jesus’ priestly ministry comes first in a positive note of encouragement, then in a negative note of warning, and finally in a positive reassurance based on the hearers’ past record of faith. The term “confidence” opens and closes the exhortation (vv. 19, 35), marking its boundaries (serving as an *inclusio*) and reinforcing its theme. Because Jesus’ blood has cleansed our consciences, we may enter God’s heavenly sanctuary with confidence, hold fast to our Christian confession, and support each other in persevering hope (vv. 19–25). On the other hand, to abandon fellowship with Christ, seeking assurance in obsolete old covenant institutions, is to incur severe judgment, from which the law’s sacrifices offer no escape (vv. 26–31). Yet, though sobered by this warning, hearers should nevertheless recall their past record of steadfast faith amid severe sufferings, for this evidence of God’s grace will fortify their confidence (vv. 32–35).

HEBREWS 10:19–25

¹⁹Therefore, brothers,¹ since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*

Section Overview: Draw Near to God and Encourage Each Other

Three hortatory subjunctives—in which the speaker exhorts himself along with his hearers—articulate the responses Jesus’ superior priesthood should evoke from us: “let us draw near” (Heb. 10:22), “let us hold fast” (v. 23), and “let us consider” (v. 24). To motivate his hearers, our preacher first summarizes the result of Christ’s ministry as our Great High Priest: his blood and flesh, offered in death, have opened for us a “new and living way” into the Most Holy Place in heaven, so that we can approach God with confidence (vv. 19–22). God’s faithfulness gives us reason to hold fast to our hope in his promises (v. 23). Perseverance is not a solitary achievement but a corporate calling, so we must “consider” each other, seeking to stimulate loving actions as we meet together (vv. 24–25). A final reason for these positive exhortations is that “the Day,” when Christ’s enemies are made his footstool at his return (v. 13), is drawing near (v. 25).

This exhortation revisits themes in the exhortation that introduced the discourse on Christ’s priestly office and ministry (4:14–16). See table 1.5.

TABLE 1.5: Common Themes in Hebrews 4:14–16 and 10:19–25

Hebrews 4:14–16	Hebrews 10:19–25
Having . . .	Having confidence . . .
a Great High Priest . . .	(the blood of) Jesus
Jesus (the Son of God)	a Great High Priest
Let us hold fast our confession	Let us draw near (with full assurance)
Let us draw near with confidence	Let us hold fast our confession

In order to intercede for human beings with their God, a high priest must, on the one hand, *identify with* them in their weakness (5:1–3) and, on the other, have *access to God* in his holiness (5:8–10; 7:26; 9:11–12). So the exhortation that opened the sermon’s central discourse on Christ’s priestly mediation (4:14–10:35) highlighted *Jesus’ sympathy with fragile sinners* (4:14–16), while the closing exhortation focuses on *the access into the heavenly Most Holy Place* that Jesus’ sacrifice has provided.

Section Outline

- I. We have strong reasons to approach God with confidence (10:19–21)
 - A. Jesus’ sacrificial suffering opens access for us into heaven’s Most Holy Place (10:19–20)
 1. His blood cleanses from sin (10:19)
 2. His body opens a new, living route into God’s presence (10:20)
 - B. Jesus’ perpetual priestly service assures us of God’s welcome (10:21)
- II. So let us draw near to receive grace, hold fast our confession, and encourage each other (10:22–25)
 - A. Draw near to God because Christ has cleansed your consciences (10:22)
 - B. Hold fast your confession of hope because God is faithful to his promises (10:23)
 - C. Encourage each other in fellowship because the day of Christ approaches (10:24–25)

Comment

10:19–20 Two gifts from God under the new covenant motivate believers to “draw near” in worship (v. 22). Believers have (a) “confidence to enter the holy places” (vv. 19–20) and (b) “a great priest over the house of God” (v. 21). As the preceding discourse demonstrated, the first gift (confidence) is based on the second (Jesus’ priestly ministry), which removed the sinful defilement that would otherwise have excluded sinners from God’s presence. The preacher has already urged his readers to hold fast to their confidence (3:6, 14), and at the conclusion of this exhortation he will insist that they not throw it away (10:35).

The “holy places” are the Most Holy Place in God’s heavenly sanctuary, the original from which the earthly tabernacle was copied (8:2, 5). Jesus has entered the heavenly sanctuary on our behalf, bringing not the blood of slain animals but his own blood, the evidence of his sacrificial death on our behalf (9:24–25). As he entered, therefore, he “opened” or “inaugurated” (*enkainizō*; also in 9:18) for us a route into heaven’s inmost sanctuary “through the curtain.” The repetition of “curtain” reminds us that Jesus has gone “behind the curtain” as the high priest in the order of Melchizedek, and his presence there anchors our souls in solid hope (6:19–20). The Greek terms rendered “to enter” (*eisodos*) and “way” (*hodos*) emphasize

the change that has occurred since the OT era, when “the way [*hodos*] into the holy places” was not yet displayed (9:8–10).

Now, not only has Jesus entered God’s glorious presence, but we also may draw near to God’s throne of grace through him (4:16; 10:22). The Gospels record that, when Jesus died on the cross, the temple’s curtain, separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place, was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Hebrews provides the Holy Spirit’s interpretation of that event. This way of access is both “new” and “living.” It is “new” because Jesus has opened it recently. It is “living,” even though inaugurated through his death, because this High Priest, who died once for all, has been raised and “lives forever to make intercession” for those who draw near to God through him (Heb. 7:24–25).

The parenthetical comment “that is, through his flesh,” though it could be understood as saying that the curtain itself symbolized Jesus’ flesh, is probably parallel to “by the blood of Jesus” in verse 19. Thus it refers not so much to the veil itself but rather to the entire sacrificial event that grants access to God. The divine Son assumed our “blood and flesh” so that he could die for us (2:14–18) and thus qualify us to “enter the holy places . . . by the new and living way.”

10:21 The second rationale for our drawing near is that we have a “great priest over the house of God.” In the OT “the great priest” (Hb. *hakkohen haggadol*; LXX *ho hierous ho megas*) was the high priest (Num. 35:25–32). In the exhortation that opened this sermon’s discourse on priesthood, Jesus was called a “great high priest” (Heb. 4:14). Both his death and his never-ending life contribute to the perfection of his priestly mediation. Moreover, an echo of the contrast between Moses and the Son reminds us of his authority “over the house of God” and of our identity as “his house,” the people he rules and among whom he dwells (3:6).

10:22 Having recapped the indicative foundation of Christians’ confidence, our preacher now expresses the imperative implications in three hortatory subjunctives, which include the three lasting virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:3–5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8). These three appeared in another order (love, hope, faith) in the book’s earlier reminder of the hearers’ past faithfulness (Heb. 6:10–12).

First, we must “draw near” to God’s throne of grace (cf. 4:16), exercising the priestly privilege that under the old covenant had been restricted to a few (7:19, 25; 10:1; cf. 11:6). We can approach God “in full assurance of faith,” just as we must persevere in “full assurance of hope until the end” (6:11). Our confident assurance comes from the fact that our hearts have been “sprinkled clean from an evil conscience.” Under the old covenant, ceremonially defiled persons were sprinkled with water containing the ashes of a heifer for ritual cleansing (9:13). Now our consciousness of defilement from sins has been removed through the “sprinkling” of Christ’s blood (12:23–24; cf. 1 Pet. 1:2). This cleansing of conscience is received through faith and is visibly signified and sealed in baptism: “our bodies washed with pure water.”

10:23 Second, we must “hold fast the confession of our hope.” Hebrews has called its hearers to “hold fast” to our confidence and to our boasting in hope (3:6; cf. 6:18), to the reality that we grasped in the beginning (3:14), and to our confession of faith (4:14). Perseverance is essential because the present situation of Christians is like Israel’s in the wilderness, undergoing testing en route to God’s promised rest (3:7–4:13). The complete salvation for which we wait will arrive when Jesus reappears from heaven (9:28). In the meantime our hope is sustained by the assurance that God, who promised us rescue and rest, “is faithful.” He has sealed his promises by two unchangeable things in which he cannot lie: his promise to Abraham and his oath sworn to Christ as a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (6:12–18). Therefore we, like ancient believers such as Sarah (11:11), can rely on his faithfulness.

10:24–25 Finally, believers must “consider” one another for the purpose of stirring up, or “provoking,” each other to love and good works. The noun rendered “stir up” (*paroxysmos*) also appears with reference to Paul and Barnabas’s “sharp disagreement” over John Mark (Acts 15:39). The cognate verb describes Paul’s outrage over idolatry (Acts 17:16). Our preacher’s choice of this term, expressing stimulus to the point of discomfort, is itself provocative! As in its other appearance in Hebrews (3:1), “consider” (*katanoeō*) has a personal object: we must direct our attention to fellow believers, who need encouragement in showing love through good deeds. Previously the hearers had demonstrated love in serving others’ needs (6:10). Such compassionate care in action is the sort of sacrificial offering that all believers, as priests consecrated by Christ’s blood, must offer for the pleasure of God (13:16).

The urgency of their responsibility toward one another is heightened by the pressures threatening to draw believers away from Christ and his gathered church. Some had already fallen into the habit of “neglecting to meet together,” perhaps because being known as Jesus’ followers entailed “reproach and affliction” from their own family and the wider Jewish community (10:33; 11:26; 13:11–13). Our preacher urges his hearers to “exhort [*parakaleō*] one another every day,” strengthening the weak and the wavering (3:12–13; 12:12–15). This is the purpose of his “word of exhortation” (13:22).

A final motivation supports the call to mutual accountability: “the Day” is drawing near (10:25). The OT prophets announced that “the day of the LORD is near,” often portraying this day as one of judgment to be dreaded (Isa. 13:6–9; cf. Jer. 46:10; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Zeph. 1:14–15). NT authors also predict the coming of “the Day” of the Lord, now identified as the “day of Jesus Christ,” when he will reappear from heaven (Phil. 1:6; cf. 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:10; 2:16; Heb. 9:28). This day will bring both judgment and salvation (1 Cor. 3:13; 5:5; 2 Tim. 1:12; 4:8). Therefore, its approach simultaneously sustains hope in suffering believers (Heb. 10:34; 11:35–38) and issues a terrifying warning to those tempted to abandon Christ and his congregation (10:26–31).

Response

The author has told us how to respond to Christ's work. Through his atoning sacrifice and living intercession, we must "draw near" to God in worship, confident of his welcome. Because God is the faithful fulfiller of promises, we must keep a firm grip on the hope we confess. The approach of the Day on which that hope will arrive in full must move us to care for each other's needs and to cultivate each other's faith, lest any lose their moorings and drift into ruin.

HEBREWS 10:26–35

²⁶ For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³² But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, ³³ sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. ³⁴ For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵ Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

Section Overview: A Terrifying Warning and Reassuring Memories

For the third time our preacher reasons that those who ignore or repudiate the Son of God incur the severest of punishments. The law "declared by angels" was so holy that its violation "received a just retribution." How much less will those escape who ignore the message of salvation spoken by the Son, who excels the angels (Heb. 2:1–4)! In 6:4–8, the author listed privileges of participating in the new covenant community. Then he warned that anyone who abandoned such gracious gifts by committing apostasy could not be restored because such a person had allied himself with those who crucified the Son of God. Now the author repeats his argument that disregarding the word of salvation spoken by Christ deserves even greater punishment than did a breach of the law God spoke through angels (2:1–4). He combines this reasoning with the charge of assaulting the Son of God (6:6) to

reinforce his sober warning that “sinning deliberately”—repudiating Christ by seeking atonement elsewhere—deserves God’s fiery judgment (10:26–31).

Our author is too wise and pastoral, however, to motivate his hearers only by fear. As he did in 6:9–12, here he balances his terrifying announcement of apostasy’s dire consequences with a heartening reminder of his hearers’ previous record of courageous faith at the outset of their Christian pilgrimage (10:32–35). They endured ridicule and the loss of property for Jesus’ sake, and they did not withdraw from identifying with other Christian sufferers, including those in chains. Those evidences of God’s gracious work in their hearts should fortify their confidence that he is faithful to keep his promises.

Section Outline

- I. A terrifying warning: repudiating God’s Son after learning the truth will incur worse punishment than the law’s severest penalties (10:26–31)
 - A. No sacrifice for sins, but only fiery judgment, awaits those who turn from the truth they once received (10:26–27)
 - B. Merciless death was imposed on violators of the law of Moses; and those who repudiate God’s Son, his blood, and his Spirit will receive worse punishment (10:28–29)
 - C. Scripture shows that the living God judges his people in justice (10:30–31)
- II. Reassuring memories: remember the sufferings you endured together when the light of Christ first shone on you (10:32–35)
 - A. Remember your initial endurance amid sufferings (10:32–34)
 - B. Do not cast away your confidence, for God will reward your faithfulness (10:35)

Comment

10:26 Because “the Day” of Christ’s return to subdue his enemies is “drawing near” (10:13, 25), to “go on sinning deliberately” after “receiving the knowledge of the truth” is to bring upon oneself the severest form of divine wrath. “Deliberately” (*hekousiōs*) and its cognates describe actions performed voluntarily, not under coercion (Lev. 7:16; Num. 15:3; Ezra 1:4–6; 3:5; Ps. 54:6 [53:8 LXX]; Philem. 14; 1 Pet. 5:2). The law of Moses distinguished between sins committed inadvertently out of ignorance and those committed “with a high hand,” reviling the Lord and despising his word (Num. 15:22–31; cf. Deut. 17:12). Atonement through sacrifice was possible for inadvertent violations of commandments (“unintentional sins”; Heb. 5:2; 9:7), but not for transgressions committed deliberately and defiantly.

In a move that would have sounded shocking to Jewish ears, our author identifies the high-handed, unforgiveable sin not as a willful breach of the Ten Commandments but as abandoning trust in the Son of God and the blood he shed to sanctify sinners (6:6; 10:29) *by returning to the OT sanctuary and its sacrifices*. This

repudiation of Christ is not a sin committed in ignorance, for it is committed by those who have received “the knowledge of the truth” (10:26), who were “enlightened” (6:4–5; 10:32) when they heard the good news of cleansing through Jesus’ blood (4:2; 10:19–22).

The discussion of the contrast between the old covenant and its animal sacrifices, on the one hand, and the once-for-all sacrifice offered by Jesus to inaugurate the new covenant, on the other (8:1–10:18) has shown why “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” if we turn away from Christ to seek cleansing elsewhere. The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins, but *now* even their foreshadowing function has been rendered obsolete by the once-for-all, conscience-cleansing offering of Christ’s body. As we learned from Psalm 40, “He *does away* with the first in order to establish the second” (Heb. 10:5–10). This development in redemptive history means that, now that Jesus has inaugurated the new covenant (10:18), “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” in *any* sense under the old covenant system.

10:27 All that remains for those who abandon God’s provision in Christ is a “fearful expectation of judgment” and a “fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” of God. The author blends wording from Isaiah 26:11 and Zephaniah 1:18. “Fury” translates the Greek *zēlos*, which refers to God’s zeal for his own glory and his jealousy for his people’s absolute loyalty.

10:28–29 Our preacher again reasons from lesser to greater: violations of God’s lesser-to-greater revelations deserve lesser-to-greater punishments. God entrusted the law to Moses, so the violation of its commands warranted capital punishment (in many cases). To “set aside” (*atheteō*) the law of Moses may sound like a mild offense, but it is actually to reject the authority of God, who spoke the law’s commandments (cf. Mark 7:9; Luke 7:30). In Ezekiel 22:26 God accuses Judah’s priests of having “done violence” (LXX *atheteō*) to his law and having defiled his sanctuary. Because the punishment was so severe, Israel’s judges were obligated to establish an offender’s guilt through the “evidence of two or three witnesses” (cf. Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:1–7; 19:15; cf. also Matt. 18:16; 2 Cor. 13:1; 1 Tim. 5:19). Mercy could not be shown to those committing capital violations, such as murder or advocating idolatrous worship (Deut. 13:6–11; 19:11–13).

Mere physical execution, however, cannot compare with the “worse punishment” awaiting those who have contemptuously repudiated the Son of God, the mediator of the new and better covenant. Previously the preacher characterized the sin of apostasy as “crucifying once again” and “holding . . . up to contempt” the divine and messianic Son (Heb. 6:6). Now the defiant scorn is portrayed as “[trampling] underfoot,” treating him as utterly worthless (cf. Isa. 10:6; 25:10; Matt. 5:13; 7:6; Luke 8:5).

To turn from Christ back to the ineffective animal offerings of the OT is to pour scorn not only on Christ’s person but also on his infinitely costly sacrifice, “profaning” (regarding as unholy) the “blood of the covenant” he shed to atone

for others' transgressions (Heb. 9:14–15). To look elsewhere for atonement is tantamount to claiming that Jesus shed his blood not as a sinless substitute for sinful people (7:26; 9:14) but merely as one more defiled sinner receiving his just deserts, along with the rest of humanity (9:27; Rom. 5:12; 6:23). It is all too possible to be part of the covenant community, even to be "sanctified" (set apart from the unbelieving world) visibly and externally by the "blood of the covenant" (cf. Heb. 9:18–20), but then, through unbelief, to throw away the benefits offered in the gospel (10:35–39). Because the Holy Spirit is bearing witness to us that Christ's death secures forgiveness of sins (10:15–18), to repudiate Christ and his blood is to "outrage" the Spirit as the messenger of this grace.

10:30–31 The reasoning that leads from the capital punishment of those who disregarded the Mosaic law to a more terrifying penalty for those who spurn Christ is confirmed by God's announcement that he will repay vengeance to his enemies and will judge his people. Two OT citations are drawn from the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:35, 36; cf. Ps. 135:14). As in the earlier citation of Isaiah 8:17–18 (Heb. 2:13), "and again" is inserted to show that, though they are adjoining, each quotation makes a distinctive statement, the second complementing the first. Moses' song previewed the future history of the Lord's faithful grace toward Israel (Deut. 32:1–14), Israel's unfaithfulness (vv. 15–18), the Lord's judgment on his unfaithful people (vv. 19–38), and the Lord's eventual compassion on his humbled people and vengeance on their enemies (vv. 39–43).

The words cited by our preacher appear in the section in Deuteronomy 32 announcing Israel's punishment under the just hand of God. In the second statement the verb "judge" (*krinō*) can include both vindicating and condemning verdicts; thus in Deuteronomy 32:36 the ESV and other versions opt for "vindicate," since the next line says that the Lord will have compassion on his people. Here in Hebrews, however, our author uses "judge" in a negative sense, parallel to exacting "vengeance." His point is that God exacts vengeance not only on Israel's enemies (Deut. 32:41) but also on those among *his own people* who spurn his grace in unbelief. Being a member of the covenant community does not, in itself, guarantee immunity from divine displeasure, either for OT Israel or for the NT church.

Again our author states that it is "fearful" (*phoberos*; cf. Heb. 10:27) to be confronted by God in his wrath apart from the cleansing of Christ's blood. Similarly, the psalmist extols God as the one "to be feared" (Ps. 76:7–12 [LXX 75:8–13]), and Jesus himself advised his hearers to fear God "who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28). Moses, the faithful servant in God's house (Heb. 3:5) who met God on the mountain (8:5), found the display of divine glory "terrifying" (*phoberos*) and trembled with fear (12:21). To fall into the hands of the living God when his jealous anger is kindled is to face anguish and destruction.

10:32 Although some in the original congregation were at risk of "[falling] away from the living God" (3:12), our preacher hastens to reassure his hearers that the evidence of God's grace in their response to suffering in "the former days" gives

them grounds to expect that their faith will stand the test of mounting opposition in the present. Fear has its place in dispelling the “deceitfulness of sin” and alerting us to its danger (3:13), but it is God’s kindness that leads to repentance and his initiating love that evokes our love in return (Rom. 2:4; 1 John 4:10–12, 19).

Recalling how Christ’s light-giving word produced life-changing fruit when it first burst into our hearts gives stronger grounds for persistent trust in the face of opposition. The hearers were “enlightened” when the gospel of Christ was first preached to them and they “tasted the goodness of the word of God” (Heb. 6:4–5). At that point they “endured a hard struggle with sufferings.” Endurance under persecution will be a major emphasis in the next section of the sermon (10:36; 12:1–3, 7), as it has been implicit in the exhortations to “hold fast” our confession (3:6, 14; 4:14; 6:18; 10:23). “Struggle” (Gk. *athlesis*) has overtones of both military combat and sports, since these activities were closely connected in the Hellenistic world (Phil. 1:27; 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:5). Our author uses athletic imagery elsewhere in 6:20 (“forerunner”) and in 12:1–2, 11–13.

10:33–34 Earlier in their history, the recipients of Hebrews had suffered both individually and corporately. Their past readiness to identify with persecuted fellow believers set a standard that they need to recapture in the present. Since the same sorts of afflictions are threatening their personal safety, freedom, and financial security, they must recall how God’s grace had strengthened them to suffer alongside each other. The author itemizes their experiences in four categories, starting and ending with personal distresses. Between these, he commends their readiness to identify themselves with other sufferers for the faith:

Personal: publicly exposed to reproach and affliction

Corporate identification: partners with those so treated

Corporate identification: you suffered with³¹ those in prison [AT]

Personal: joyfully accepted the plundering of your property

Fear of persecution may be motivating “some” to neglect gathering with other followers of Jesus (10:25), so the preacher commends his hearers’ previous courage in staying close to those who were paying the price of faithfulness, enduring both public reproach and imprisonment. Among the forefathers in faith soon to be empaneled as witnesses to attest to God’s reliability (11:1–40) is Moses, who “considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” and therefore chose “to be mistreated with the people of God” (11:25–26).

Like Moses (and like themselves, at the outset) the hearers of this letter must also “bear the reproach” Jesus endured by sharing the repudiation he suffered “outside the camp”—excluded from the established Jewish community (13:12–13; cf. comments on 13:11–12; 13:13–14). Their proactive ministry to prisoners in the past must continue in the present, despite the risk of guilt by association (13:3).

31 The ESV renders *sympatheō* as “had compassion on” here, and the same verb as “sympathize” in 4:15. Since the verb’s stem echoes “sufferings” (*pathēmation*) in 10:32, it would seem that our author refers to active “co-suffering,” not just emotional empathy.

They had joyfully acquiesced when their property was seized by others, confident that they had a better, abiding possession, just as the patriarchs fixed their spiritual sights on a city with foundations, “whose designer and builder is God”—a better, heavenly country (11:10, 16). The hope of a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (12:28) and a “lasting city” to come (13:14) will sustain Jesus’ followers today, just as it strengthened OT people of faith to endure mocking, flogging, chains, homelessness, destitution, and death (11:36–38).

10:35 With the reappearance of “confidence” (*parrēsia*), the exhortation arising from Jesus’ superior priesthood draws to a close. Those who approach God through Jesus’ sacrifice have confident access in the present to enter the heavenly Most Holy Place in worship (10:19–21), and likewise they have confident hope for the future, knowing that in his overflowing generosity God has promised a great reward. The exhortation not to “throw away your confidence” also builds a bridge to a new section (10:36–12:17), in which the enduring faith that pleases God, described in Habakkuk 2:3–4, will be illustrated in a series of OT “witnesses” (Heb. 11:1–40) and in Jesus, the “founder and perfecter” of faith (Heb. 12:1–2). As God promised Abraham a great reward (Gen. 15:1), so now those who hold fast their confidence in Jesus can expect a great reward bestowed by grace, the better, abiding possession of a heavenly homeland (Heb. 11:16).

Response

This third terrifying warning against turning away from Jesus—by turning *back* to the OT institutions God had instituted as shadows of good things to come—soberly summons us to hold fast our confession of faith in Jesus, “the apostle and high priest of our confession” (3:1). The new covenant’s inauguration has made obsolete the law with its sanctuary and sacrifices, and the only sacrifice that removes sins has been offered once for all by Christ himself. To spurn him is to incur God’s wrath, so Christians have reason to “fear lest any of you should seem to have failed” to enter God’s rest through enduring faith (4:1). But fear is not our only motive for enduring to the end. Our grateful recollection of God’s sustaining grace in the past and our hopeful expectation of the lasting inheritance awaiting us in the future strengthen us to move forward in confidence.

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 10:36–12:17

The exhortation not to “throw away your confidence, which has a great reward,” naturally leads to a discourse addressing the vital importance of enduring faith in God’s promises for the future. “Faith” (*pistis*) and its cognate verb “believe” (*pisteuō*) appear no less than twenty-eight times in Hebrews 10:36–12:17. Along with faith is its vital attribute “endurance” (*hypomonē*; cognate verb “endure,” *hypomenō*). Although the terms “endure/endurance” are less frequent (10:32, 36; 12:1–3, 7), our author’s conception of faith entails long-lasting stamina. The faith that pleases God does not shrink back in the face of opposition and suffering (10:38–39). It does not “grow weary or fainthearted” (12:3) but looks forward in hope and clings to God’s promises, even when the fulfillment of those promises lies far away in an unseen future (11:1, 7, 9–10, 13, 35, 39–40).

This fifth movement in the sermon opens with its underlying OT text, Habakkuk 2:3–4 (Heb. 10:36–39). Then an extended survey of the “people of old” who received God’s commendation (11:1–40) illustrates the characteristics of faith mentioned in the Habakkuk citation. The “great cloud of witnesses” who attest to God’s faithfulness from the pages of Scripture draws our attention to Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of faith” (AT), whose endurance of sinners’ hostility must fortify the hearers to endure suffering as confirmation of the Father’s good purpose for his true sons (12:1–11). Finally, believers must embrace their corporate responsibility for each other, supporting the spiritually weak and resisting the influence of those whose idolatry and sensuality would spread infection to others (12:12–17).

HEBREWS 10:36–39

³⁶ For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. ³⁷ For,

“Yet a little while,
and the coming one will come and will not delay;
³⁸ but my righteous one shall live by faith,
and if he shrinks back,
my soul has no pleasure in him.”

³⁹ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.

Section Overview: Exhortation to Enduring Faith

The preacher now restates positively the point he just made negatively (table 1.6).

TABLE 1.6: Hebrews 10:36 as a Positive Restatement of 10:35

10:35	10:36
do <i>not</i> throw away your <i>confidence</i>	you have <i>need</i> of <i>endurance</i>
[because it] has a great <i>reward</i>	so that . . . you may <i>receive what is promised</i>

The need for endurance is demonstrated by Habakkuk 2:3–4, which is first quoted and then followed by a comment assuring hearers that their faith is the kind that lasts and leads to life. Four aspects of faith appear in the words of Habakkuk: Faith (a) acts in light of God’s promises for the future, (b) characterizes those whom God declares “righteous,” (c) does not shrink back, and (d) pleases God. These will be illustrated in the vignettes of OT believers that follow (Heb. 11:1–40).

Section Outline

- I. By faith that endures, you will receive God’s promised blessing (10:36)
- II. God will come promptly to take pleasure in believers who endure (10:37–38)
 - A. The Coming One will come soon (10:37)
 - B. God takes pleasure in his righteous one, who lives by faith (10:38a)
 - C. God takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back in unbelief (10:38b)
- III. We have enduring faith and can expect salvation (10:39)

Comment

10:36 The prohibition of verse 35 (“do not throw away your confidence”) is restated in positive terms (“you have need of endurance”), transitioning to the theme of faith’s endurance. Faith must endure because God’s promises concern things not yet seen (11:1, 7). Those who trust God’s promises take appropriate action in the present in light of his announcements concerning the future. Faith is not mere intellectual assent to God’s declarations; rather, it moves the believer to do “the will of God.” Christ came “to do your will, O God” (10:7), and the fruit of his costly commitment to do God’s will (Mark 14:36) is the new covenant in which God writes his laws on believers’ hearts (Heb. 8:10) so that they may willingly do his will.

Faith’s forward focus is implied in the prospect of receiving “what is promised” by God. OT believers, “who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12), have set the example, with Abraham in the lead (6:13–17; 7:6; 11:9–19). Although they received God’s promises in words and preliminary fulfillments (6:15; 11:33), in another sense they “did not receive what was promised” but awaited God’s better provision in the new covenant instituted by Christ (11:39; cf. 11:13). We too eagerly await Christ’s return and the full salvation he will bring (9:28).

10:37–38 Most of this OT quotation is from Habakkuk 2:3–4, but “a little while” comes from Isaiah 26:20–21, intensifying the promise that the Coming One “will not delay” his arrival. Both prophetic texts advise sufferers to await patiently the coming of their God to deliver them and judge their enemies. The context of the words drawn from Habakkuk expresses the tension between eager expectancy and patient endurance demanded by the mysterious timing of God’s promise keeping: “The vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end. . . . If it seems slow, wait [LXX *hypomenō*, “endure”] for it; it will surely come; it will not delay” (Hab. 2:3). Jesus prepared his followers for the unpredictability of his return, which may seem either unduly delayed or unexpectedly sudden (Luke 12:35–46; 18:7–8; cf. 1 Thess. 5:1–4; 2 Pet. 3:4–10).

The Hebrew of Habakkuk 2:4 is difficult. The LXX seems to capture its sense by contrasting the individual who displeases God through shrinking back to “my righteous one” who “shall live by faith.” Our author inverts the descriptions, introducing the faithful righteous one before the apostate who “shrinks back” in cowardice³² and receives God’s displeasure. Key terms from this text (righteous, faith, pleasure) will reappear in the following survey of OT saints: “faith” distinguishes the person whom God commends as “my righteous one,” such as Abel or Noah (cf. Heb. 11:4, 7), while Scripture’s statement that Enoch “walked with God” means that he “was commended as having pleased God” (11:5–6).

10:39 Our author follows the negative conclusion of the OT citation (“my soul has no pleasure in” the one who shrinks back) with the reassurance that his hearers are

³² “Shrinks back” represents a verb (*hypostellō*) and cognate noun (*hypostolē*) that refer to avoiding right action through undue fear (Acts 20:20, 27; Gal. 2:12; cf. Deut. 1:17 LXX).

not among the cowering apostates who are destined for destruction but instead have the lasting faith that secures their souls for eternal life (1 Thess. 5:9).

Response

Faith in Jesus meets stiff opposition in every age. The parable of the sower shows that various forces work against our endurance all the way until the time of harvest (Mark 4:3–20). In cultures enamored with fluidity and flexibility in relationships, personal identity, and religious allegiance, the stamina of faith in Jesus faces even greater challenges. But the Lord assures us that he “will come and will not delay,” and he takes pleasure in people who trust him persistently. His promises supply and sustain the endurance we need.

OVERVIEW OF

HEBREWS 11:1–40

Hebrews 11:1–40 surveys OT history from the perspective of faith, showing how the biblical account of early people of faith illustrates the themes of Habakkuk 2:3–4 (cf. Heb. 10:37–38): faith focuses on God’s promise for the future, perseveres, gives God pleasure, and wins his verdict that the one who lives by faith is “righteous.” By faith believers gain access to realities that cannot be seen. Faith moves people to take appropriate action in response to God’s word—offering an acceptable sacrifice, building an ark, setting out for a promised but heretofore unseen homeland, and so on. The survey opens and closes with the comment that God has “commended” (*martyreō*) the ancients for their faith (11:2, 39). After an introduction defining faith and the approving testimony it receives from God (vv. 1–2), each installment in the survey opens with “by faith” (*pistei*) (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31). The repetition of “by faith” and its prime location in each statement underscore faith’s significance. At 11:32 the author shifts from specific instances to summaries of the ancients’ actions “through faith” (v. 33). The concluding comment that OT saints were “commended [*martyreō*] through their faith” forms a bridge to their role as “witnesses” (*martyrōn*) on behalf of God and his faithfulness (12:1).

HEBREWS 11:1–7

11 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the people of old received their commendation. ³By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible.

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ⁷By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

Section Overview: Faith Pleasing to God in Early Redemptive History

To appreciate how OT individuals and events illustrate the faith that God approves (Heb. 10:37–39), one must understand what faith truly is. Our author offers a concise definition of faith (11:1) and a comment on God’s commendation of the “people of old” who acted in such faith (11:2). Then he begins to work through the OT, beginning “in the beginning.” Faith in God’s written record in Genesis gives insight into the creation of the visible universe through the invisible word of God (11:3). In the pre-patriarchal history, three individuals receive God’s commendation for their faith: Abel, Enoch, and Noah (11:4–7). Each is described as “righteous” and “pleasing God,” terms drawn from Habakkuk 2:3–4.

Section Outline

- I. Introduction: faith described and commended (11:1–2)
 - A. Faith described: the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen (11:1)
 - B. Faith commended: by faith the ancients received God’s commendation (11:2)
- II. By faith we understand that the visible universe was created by God’s invisible word (11:3)
- III. By faith the ancients before Abraham received God’s approval (11:4–7)

- A. Abel's sacrifice received God's approval before he died (11:4)
- B. Enoch walked with (that is, pleased) God and did not die (11:5–6)
- C. Noah, warned of a flood not yet seen, built an ark and so inherited the righteousness of faith (11:7)

Comment

11:1 Most translations present this verse as describing the subjective experience of faith as “assurance” and “conviction.” The Greek terms chosen by our author focus instead on the objective realities of faith and could perhaps be translated, “Faith is the *reality* [*substance*] of things hoped for, the *evidence that proves* things unseen” (cf. KJV, NKJV). The Greek noun (*hypostasis*) represented by “assurance” (ESV, RSV, NRSV, NIV, NASB) earlier described the Son as the “exact imprint of [God’s] *nature*” (1:3). In 3:14 it may include a subjective sense (ESV “our original *confidence*”), though even there “the beginning of the *substantial reality* in which our faith rests” (AT) is preferable. Elsewhere our author uses “confidence” (*parrēsia*; 10:19, 35) and “full assurance” (*plērophoria*; 10:22) to express subjective assurance. Here he has chosen “reality/substance” and paired it with a term that refers to a legal argument substantiated by evidence (*elenchos*; Job 13:6; 16:21; 23:7 LXX). Faith goes beyond our internal attitudes to put us in touch with realities that are “not seen” (because they transcend the material universe; Heb. 11:3) but are “hoped for” (because they are still future; 11:7; cf. Rom. 8:24). One commentator translates this verse, “Now faith celebrates the objective reality [of the blessings] for which we hope, the demonstration of events as yet unseen.”³³

11:2 By means of faith, OT figures “received their commendation” from God. Here the ESV uses “commendation” and “commend” to represent the Greek verb *martyreō* (11:2, 4, 5, 39). Hebrews has introduced biblical quotations and allusions as “testimony” or “witness” (*martyreō*) borne by God (7:8, 17; 10:5; cf. 2:5). God has taken the witness stand to testify on behalf of OT believers, that they were righteous and pleasing to him, and his testimony is recorded in the OT narrative. Though repudiated and oppressed by human opponents (11:24–26, 36–38), “all these” were nevertheless “commended through their faith” by God’s testimony in the OT (v. 39). As God bears witness on their behalf in Scripture, so they constitute a “great cloud of witnesses” on his behalf, testifying to his faithfulness (12:1; cf. 11:4, 13–14, 35).

11:3 Although our preacher will emphasize faith’s forward-looking focus, he begins his biblical history of faith in the remote past, with the creation of the universe, which no human eye saw. By faith we understand from Genesis that “the ages” (the temporally tinged term *tous aiōnas*, from 1:2) were created by the word of God. In Genesis 1 the repeated refrain “And God said” brings creatures into existence and arranges them in order (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). This spoken word of God is not visible, yet its product—the material universe—can be seen. So God’s

³³ Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 325.

unseen reality and power transcend all that our eyes behold (cf. Heb. 8:5). Faith, as the evidence that demonstrates the existence of “things not seen” (11:1), puts us in touch with eternal reality that precedes, gives rise to, sustains, and will outlast the heavens and earth that present themselves to our eyes (1:10–12; 12:26–28).

11:4 Abel’s sacrifice “of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions” was better than the offering presented by Cain, his brother (Gen. 4:1–16). Genesis 4:4–5 states that the Lord “had regard for” Abel and his gifts but not for Cain’s. Our author restates the meaning of Moses’ narrative in terms of Habakkuk 2:3–4: by accepting Abel’s offering, God “bore witness” (*martyreō*) on behalf of Abel, affirming that he was “righteous” (cf. also Matt. 23:35; 1 John 3:12). This shows that Abel was acting in “faith,” since “my righteous one shall live by faith” (Heb. 10:38).

Yet Abel’s story illustrates not only God-pleasing faith but also untimely, violent death. Our author’s brief “though he died” invites recollection of the circumstances of Abel’s death: he was murdered by his envious brother. Cain could not hide his crime from the divine judge: “The voice of your brother’s blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10). At that moment Abel, though dead, nonetheless spoke, crying out for just retribution (cf. Rev. 6:9–10). Our preacher will later contrast the justice-demanding outcry of Abel’s blood with the compassionate appeal for forgiveness uttered by Jesus’ blood on our behalf (Heb. 12:24). But Abel, though dead, also affirms God’s faithfulness.

As the first of many who “died in faith, not having received the things promised” (11:13), Abel heads the chorus of witnesses who speak from Scripture’s pages, testifying that the God who promises is faithful (v. 11), even as their blood is shed (vv. 35–37). Abel is among the “spirits of the righteous made perfect,” assembled to worship in the heavenly Jerusalem (12:23). These faithful sufferers of old set the pace for those who hear this sermon-letter now, whose struggle against sin has not yet reached the point of bloodshed (12:4). The ancients were privileged to serve as “previews” of faith’s founder and perfecter, Jesus, who endured execution on the cross for his people (12:2).

11:5–6 Enoch’s experience was the counterpoint to Abel’s: he did “not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him.” Our author follows the lead of the LXX, which interpreted the Hebrew metaphor “walked with God” (twice in Gen. 5:21–24) as “was well-pleasing to God.” This description shows that Enoch fit Habakkuk’s description of the righteous one who lives by faith (Hab. 2:4; cf. Heb. 10:37–38). Since God’s soul “has no pleasure” in anyone who pulls back in unbelief (10:38), the opposite is true of one with persevering faith: God “has pleasure” in such a believer. Even though the Genesis accounts of Abel and Enoch do not contain the word “faith,” reading their stories through the lens of Habakkuk 2:3–4 makes their faith visible. By faith Enoch pleased God during his earthly life, and so “he was not found, because God had taken him” (paraphrasing Gen. 5:24 LXX).

The inference that Enoch lived by faith comes not only from the link between human faith and God’s pleasure in the Habakkuk citation but also from a further

consideration: the only way to draw near to God to receive his blessing is to approach him in faith, believing (a) that he exists and (b) that, to those who seek him, he becomes a rewarder (Heb. 11:6). “Reward” (10:35; 11:26) is one of several ways that Hebrews describes the object of believers’ hope—their inheritance (1:14; 6:12, 17; 9:15; 11:8–9) in the heavenly homeland and city of God (11:10, 16; 13:14).

These first two “heroes” of faith stand at the extremes that their successors would experience: violent death (martyrdom), on the one hand, and a rare anticipation of resurrection life, on the other. This OT history of faith will close with a catalogue that transitions from a series of visible *victories* in life (11:33–35a) to a litany of *hardships and death*, endured in anticipation of a better resurrection to come (11:35b–38).

11:7 The last account of faith in pre-patriarchal history is that of Noah (Genesis 6–9). Moses’ narrative facilitates the link between Noah and faith, testifying that “Noah was a *righteous* man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:9). The LXX paraphrases this last Hebrew phrase as “Noah was pleasing [*euarestēō*] to God.” Noah was, therefore, a righteous man who lived by faith. His *living* by faith is what we must see: when “warned by God concerning events as yet unseen”—namely, an impending life-destroying flood (Gen. 6:13–21)—Noah’s faith and “reverent fear” (Heb. 11:7) were exercised in action. He built an ark just as God commanded (Gen. 6:22). Faith’s forward focus is seen here as the coming flood is characterized as “*not yet seen*” (AT).

The outcomes of Noah’s proactive faith were the salvation of his household and the condemnation of the rebellious world (Gen. 6:5–8; 7:7, 23; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5). Our preacher will comment that the “world was not worthy” of the persecuted people of faith (Heb. 11:38), urging his hearers to welcome the exclusion they themselves may suffer in union with Christ (11:24–26; 13:12–13). Noah had already received God’s favor before he built the ark (Gen. 6:8). When his faith was tested and shown to be genuine, Noah “became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.”

Response

“We walk by faith, not by sight,” wrote the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 5:7). This dichotomy between faith and sight captures the description of faith that opens Hebrews 11. However, deeply ingrained instincts often attune our expectations and emotions, our attitudes and actions, more to the circumstances we see than to the voice of God who speaks in Scripture. To please God by taking him at his word for things we cannot see, we must resist the attention-hoarding demands of the visible. At creation, God’s unseen word brought about all that our senses now perceive, and the Son’s powerful word still sustains his universe (Heb. 1:3). The primacy of God’s speech over our sight still stands. Trust that truth, and act in its light. God will be pleased.

HEBREWS 11:8–22

⁸By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. ¹¹By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

¹³These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. ¹⁵If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” ¹⁹He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. ²⁰By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²²By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

Section Overview: The Patriarchs’ Faith in God’s Promise of a Heavenly Homeland

The largest section of the Hebrews history of OT faith is devoted to Abraham. Five events of Abraham’s life are described as occurring “by faith”: (a) Abraham’s departure from his original homeland for an unseen inheritance (Heb. 11:8); (b) his (and Isaac’s and Jacob’s) sojourn as strangers in the Promised Land (11:9–10); (c) Sarah’s conception of Isaac (11:11–12); (d) the patriarchs’ deaths in hopeful expectation of a distant, heavenly country and city (11:13–16); and (e) Abraham’s readiness to sacrifice Isaac in faith that God could raise him from the dead (11:17–19).

Faith likewise sustained the next three patriarchal generations. The blessings conferred by Isaac and Jacob on their heirs and Joseph’s end-of-life direction

concerning his bones anticipated God's future fulfillment of his promises in Israel's exodus from Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land (11:20–22). Two themes are emphasized through repetition. First, the homeland sought by the patriarchs was not a geographical territory on the present earth. Rather, the patriarchs looked and longed for—and even glimpsed from afar—an indestructible city built by God himself (11:10) and belonging to a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (11:15–16). Second, the patriarchs believed in a God who could keep his word even when it required his bringing life into the realm of death (11:11–12, 19).

Section Outline

- I. By faith Abraham heeded God's call to seek the place of his promised inheritance (11:8)
- II. By faith Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob sojourned in the land God had promised them (11:9–10)
 - A. Abraham and his heirs lived in the land as aliens (11:9)
 - B. Abraham anticipated the eternal city that God had designed and built (11:10)
- III. By faith Sarah conceived the son of promise through whom Abraham's offspring would multiply (11:11–12)
 - A. God empowered Sarah to conceive, though she was too old and Abraham was (reproductively) “dead” (11:11–12a)
 - B. From these infertile parents God produced countless descendants (11:12b)
- IV. In faith the patriarchs died before receiving what God promised, confessing that their hoped-for home was heavenly (11:13–16)
 - A. Before they died, the patriarchs glimpsed from afar what God had promised (11:13a)
 - B. They confessed that they were strangers on earth, seeking a homeland that is beyond this present world (11:13b–16a)
 - C. So God committed himself to them as “their God,” and prepared the city for which they longed (11:16b)
- V. By faith Abraham offered Isaac, trusting that God could restore life to the son in whom God's promises centered (11:17–19)
 - A. Abraham offered the “only son” in whom God's promises were concentrated (11:17–18)
 - B. Abraham believed that God could raise Isaac from the dead, and—symbolically—God did (11:19)
- VI. By faith patriarchs announced future blessings (11:20–22)
 - A. Isaac pronounced different blessings on his younger (Jacob) and older (Esau) sons (11:20)
 - B. Jacob pronounced different blessings on the (younger and older) sons of Joseph (11:21)

- C. Joseph predicted the exodus and directed that his bones be brought back to the Promised Land (11:22)

Comment

11:8 Just as Noah took action “by faith” when warned of the coming flood (v. 7; cf. Gen. 6:22), so Abraham, when “called” by God, “obeyed” by “go[ing] out” of his homeland in Mesopotamia (Gen. 12:1, 4; cf. Acts 7:2–4). Faith is awakened as God’s voice speaks to his people, and faith responds readily to what God says (Heb. 3:14–4:3). Just as unbelief and disobedience were correlated in the wilderness generation’s hardened response to God’s voice (3:18–19; 4:2, 6), so Abraham’s belief in God’s promise prompted his obedience to God’s command to set out for a place that God would cause him to inherit. Faith’s trust in God’s word about “things not seen” is illustrated in Abraham’s departure, “not knowing where he was going.” The Lord had called it simply the “land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1).

11:9 Abraham’s second expression of faith, in which his son Isaac and grandson Jacob also participated, was his sojourning in tents—in temporary dwellings and transient circumstances—in the very land the Lord had promised to give his offspring as their inheritance. The patriarchs’ movement and pitching of tents at various sites in the “land of promise” is a repeated feature of the Genesis narrative (Gen. 12:8; 13:3, 12, 18; 18:1; 26:25; 33:18–19; 35:16–21, 27). Abraham’s offspring would eventually receive the entire land as an inheritance, but for Abraham himself his residence there was “as in a foreign land.” Even when Abraham beheld the land with his own eyes (Gen. 13:14–17), his actual possession of it remained a reality “not yet seen,” perceived only by faith. His alien status was most evident when his wife, Sarah, died and he needed to negotiate with Hittites to obtain a burial place for her. In making his request, Abraham acknowledged, “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you” (Gen. 23:3–20), a confession to which our preacher will later allude (Heb. 11:13).

11:10 Our preacher draws a striking conclusion from the fact that Abraham lived out his days as a stranger in the very land God had promised as his inheritance. Abraham was waiting for the “city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” In general, tent-dwelling is temporary, whereas residence in cities with foundations is stable and secure (Pss. 105:12–17; 107:4–7). Our author takes that contrast to a higher level when he speaks of “*the* city” and describes it as designed and constructed by God himself. One psalmist celebrated Mount Zion in Jerusalem, citing the security of its foundations (Ps. 87:1); but another lamented the razing of the city to its (manmade) foundations (Ps. 137:7; cf. Lam. 4:11; Ezra 4:12).

Abraham’s hope focused on a city that would be unassailable because the living God both designed and built it (cf. Rev. 21:9–26). Earlier in this sermon, a citation from Psalm 102 described the eventual dissolution of the present heavens and earth (Heb. 1:10–12; cf. 12:26–28). The heavenly sanctuary in which Jesus now ministers was “not made with hands” (9:11, 24), so it cannot be touched by

the ravages of decay or destruction. Abraham's hope looked beyond Canaan and Jerusalem, which his offspring would eventually occupy, to the ultimate city of refuge—a “lasting city,” still to come even for believers today (13:14)—in a better, heavenly country (11:16).

11:11–12 Sarah (v. 11) and Rahab (v. 31) are the only two women mentioned by name in the Hebrews registry of faith. Additionally, the statement “Women received back their dead by resurrection” (v. 35) refers to the mothers in Zarephath and Shunem, whose young sons were raised by Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17–24; 2 Kings 4:18–37). Most versions, including the ESV, present Sarah as the one exercising faith, but commentators are divided over whether Abraham or Sarah is the subject of verse 11. Those who favor Abraham argue that the Greek construction rendered “conceive” describes a *father's* contribution in (lit.) “depositing seed” (*katabolēn spermatos*). And in verse 12, which describes the result of verse 11, Abraham is the “one man” from whom countless descendants came. Some also note that Genesis presents Sarah as far from exemplary in respect to her faith (Gen. 18:11–15).

On the other hand, throughout Hebrews 11 the name of the individual(s) exercising faith closely follows the opening “by faith” (vv. 4, 5, 7, 8, 11, 17, 20, 21, 22, 24, 29, 31). (The only exceptions are vv. 23 and 30.) “Sarah” is almost certainly in the Greek nominative case, and is thus the subject who “received power.” And it is Sarah's incapacity to conceive (“past the age”) that is highlighted in verse 11.³⁴ Abraham's reproductive incapacity (“as good as dead”) is not introduced until verse 12. Moreover, the Genesis record is no more complimentary of Abraham's faith than of Sarah's. Both dismissed God's promise of a son through Sarah as laughable (Gen. 17:15–18). The fact that both Abraham and Sarah, whose faltering faith is evident in the OT text, appear in the catalogue of ancient believers whom God “commended” should encourage us all.

The faith that pleases God and receives his promises may struggle, but it does not let go (Rom. 4:16–22). We noted earlier (comment on Heb. 6:15) that in Isaac's birth Abraham received, in a preliminary form, the fulfillment of God's promise of innumerable offspring. Here our author scans across the generations to make us marvel that God's power could bring “from one man,” who was “as good as dead” (lit., “had been put to death”; *nenekrōmenou*, 11:12) in terms of reproduction, descendants as countless as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, the very imagery in which the Lord painted his astonishing promise (Gen. 15:5; 22:17; cf. 32:12; Isa. 51:2).

11:13 The patriarchal generations together are the subject of the fourth event associated with faith: “these all died.” Their deaths occurred before God's promises to them—inheritance of the land (vv. 8–9) and countless offspring (v. 12)—reached

³⁴ The ESV follows manuscripts that read, “Sarah herself received power to conceive . . . past the age.” Another textual tradition, appearing as early as a papyrus dated around AD 200 and preferred in the standard edition of the Greek New Testament (NA²⁸), contains not just one but *two* references to the impossibility of Sarah's conceiving: “Sarah herself, *barren*, received power to conceive . . . *past the age*.” Both of Sarah's disabling conditions appear in Genesis (Gen. 11:30; 16:2; 17:17).

fulfillment. Thus Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and his wives (and sons) represent the entire “cloud of witnesses” who populate the pages of the OT, who “though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised” (v. 39). By faith Abraham and the others perceived the objects of their hope across the centuries and greeted them from a distance, as Jesus himself said: “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

Those who lived by faith (Heb. 10:38) and died in faith realized that no earthly regions or cities, vulnerable as they are to invasion and desolation, could provide the security for which they longed. Thus the patriarchs “acknowledged”—or “confessed” (*homologeō*, referring to corporate confession of faith (3:1; 4:14; 10:23; 13:15)—that they were strangers and exiles while they sojourned in the *land* (of promise). They were actually confessing that they were exiles anywhere on *earth* (the Greek noun *gē* includes both “land” and “earth”). The patriarchs made this confession not only in Abraham’s negotiations with the Hittites (Gen. 23:4) but also in Jacob’s retrospective summary of his whole life, both inside and outside the Promised Land: “The days of the years of my sojourning are 130 years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained to the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their sojourning” (Gen. 47:9).

11:14–16 Our preacher reasons that the patriarchs’ confession that they were “strangers and exiles” implied not only that they were “seeking a homeland” but also that the homeland they sought was, ultimately, a “better country, that is, a heavenly one.” To acknowledge one’s status as a temporary resident, living in tents and lacking property rights “in a foreign land” (v. 9), is to imply that there is another “homeland” or “hometown” (*patris*) where one truly belongs (cf. Matt. 13:53–57). Lest we assume that the homeland for which the patriarchs longed was merely the land of Canaan, which their descendants would eventually receive as their inheritance in coming generations (Heb. 11:8), the author raises and then dismisses the patriarchs’ opportunity to occupy a geographical locale in which they could have been at home. They might have returned to Mesopotamia, the country, kindred, and father’s house that God had called Abraham to leave behind (Gen. 12:1). In fact, twenty of Jacob’s 130 years were spent outside Canaan in Mesopotamia, “that land from which” his grandfather Abraham “had gone out” (Heb. 11:15; cf. Gen. 31:38–42). Yet Jacob considered those two decades as included in his lifetime of “sojourning,” not as a period of respite in which he enjoyed the security of home (Gen. 32:4).

Whether living in the land his offspring would eventually occupy or in the land his ancestors once called “home,” Jacob described his entire 130 years on earth as a brief and stressful sojourning. Our author has strong warrant to conclude that those ancient fathers and mothers of faith desired a better, heavenly homeland and city, where they could dwell forever with the God who had drawn them into covenant.

That God is “not ashamed to be called their God” recalls the earlier, surprising announcement that the divine Son is “not ashamed” to name as “brothers” the

struggling sinful human beings whose salvation he achieves through his incarnation and suffering (Heb. 2:10–11). Genesis shows Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob to be seriously flawed. Yet, despite their sin and sometimes shaky faith, the Lord engaged them in covenant love, identifying himself as their sovereign protector: “I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you” (Gen. 17:7–8; cf. Gen. 15:1). The Lord identified himself as “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:6; cf. Gen. 28:13; 1 Kings 18:36). The city he had prepared for them and for all who follow in their footsteps of faith is that city whose foundations stand forever because God laid them (Heb. 11:10), the heavenly Jerusalem filled with joyful worship (12:22), which will outlast the coming cosmic cataclysm (12:27–28; 13:14).

11:17–19 The final event of Abraham’s life of faith was his readiness to sacrifice his “only son” Isaac, whom God had designated as the offspring through whom all of his promises would be fulfilled (Gen. 22:1–19). In several ways our author underscores the gravity of this “test” (*peirazō*) of Abraham’s faith in God, which would be shown in his readiness to act in keeping with God’s command. First, the term “offered” (*prospherō*), already associated with sacrificial bloodshed (Heb. 5:1, 3; 8:3–4; 9:7, 14), appears not once but twice. Second, our author describes Isaac as Abraham’s “only” (*monogenēs*) son, at this point following the Hebrew text of Genesis 22:2 instead of the LXX (which replaced “only” with “beloved”). Although Ishmael had been born to Abraham and the slave Hagar, Isaac was Abraham’s “only” son from the standpoint of God’s covenant promises. Third, Isaac’s indispensability to God’s good purpose is reinforced by the description of his father as “he who had received the promises” (cf. Heb. 6:12–15; 7:6) and by the quotation of God’s designation of Isaac, not Ishmael, as the son through whom Abraham’s offspring would be named (Gen. 21:12; cf. Gen. 17:18–21).

To obey God’s command that Isaac be slain so young, before marrying or fathering children, would put all God’s promises (offspring, land, blessing to all nations) in jeopardy. How could Abraham’s faithful God issue such a death sentence after issuing such promises? Our author unfolds the patriarch’s line of reasoning: “He considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead.” This conviction underlay Abraham’s words to the servants whom he and Isaac had left at the foot of the mountain: “I *and the boy* will go over there and worship *and come again to you*” (Gen. 22:5). The verbs “will go,” “worship,” and “come again” are plural: Abraham and his son will ascend the mountain, worship, and return together.

The apostle Paul observed that Abraham had already experienced God’s imparting life to the dead in the conception of Isaac from Abraham’s own “dead” body and the morbidity of Sarah’s womb (Rom. 4:19). At Mount Moriah, Abraham reasoned that nothing less than God’s power to raise the dead could reconcile Isaac’s early death and the promises God had vested in that only son. Abraham was spared fatherly anguish, and his son the blade of death, through the Lord’s provision of a

substitute (Gen. 22:11–14). So it was that Abraham “figuratively” (lit., “in a parable [*en parabolē*]”; cf. “symbolic [*parabolē*],” Heb. 9:9) did receive his son back from death, foreshadowing not only physical revivifications later in the OT (11:35) but also, supremely, the resurrection of God’s Son, “brought again from the dead” (13:20) to be our Great High Priest forever.

11:20–21 The blessings pronounced by the next generations of patriarchs, Isaac and his son Jacob, are mentioned briefly to illustrate faith’s confidence in God to bring about an as-yet-unseen future. Our author passes over in silence the ruse by which Jacob, having already purchased Esau’s inheritance right as firstborn, duped their father and stole the preeminent blessing as well (cf. Heb. 12:16–17). The story is well known, and the inversion of birth order in naming the brothers is sufficient allusion to it. Our preacher’s point is that their respective blessings from their aged and unseeing father spoke of things future and so demonstrated Isaac’s faith in things not seen (Gen. 27:27–29, 39–40).

Jacob’s deathbed blessing of Joseph’s two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, also involved a blind patriarch, the firstborn’s inheritance rights, and an inversion in which a younger was honored over an older brother (Genesis 48). Jacob’s firstborn, Reuben, had disqualified himself from the privileges of primogeniture—leadership and inheritance (Gen. 35:22; 49:3–4). When Joseph approached his dying father with his two sons, Jacob adopted both as his immediate heirs: “Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are” (Gen. 48:5). As a later Israelite historian observed, Reuben’s birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, as they would receive two tribal allotments in the Promised Land, while leadership in Israel would pass to Judah, the tribe of King David (1 Chron. 5:1–2). Again an aging and sightless patriarch preferred a younger son (Ephraim) over his older brother (Manasseh), but in this case it was deliberate (Gen. 48:13–20). By faith Jacob, despite failing physical sight, foresaw the multiplication of tribes that would descend from Ephraim (more dominant) and Manasseh (less influential) in coming generations, and he worshiped his faithful promise-keeping Lord.

11:22 Finally, the faith of the patriarchs was exhibited in the prediction and direction of the dying Joseph (Gen. 50:24–25). Although Joseph and his brothers would die in Egypt, the Lord would cause a future generation to exit Egypt and return to the land he had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Joseph “made mention of”—spoke a reminder of (*mnēmoneuō*)—the exodus, which God had predicted to Abraham (Gen. 15:13–16). Joseph’s expectant faith was confident, and his directions solemn: “Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here’” (Gen. 50:25).

Response

Four generations of Israel’s forebears illustrate the forward-looking hope that characterizes faith in the living God, who drew them into his gracious covenant. Our faith often fluctuates and falters. The brutally honest record of Genesis shows

that theirs fluctuated and faltered also. Yet their experiences of God's faithfulness and power bear witness to us from the pages of Scripture, and their testimony must fortify our fragile faith. They trusted and followed a Lord who could begin with an elderly, childless couple and create a countless multitude of descendants; who could confer on the offspring of a tent-dwelling nomad the possession of a bountiful homeland; who could raise the dead; and who could lift their hearts' line of sight beyond the span of their earthly "sojourn" to greet "from afar" blessings to come in a distant future and a "better country" than anything we have yet encountered.

We who live since Jesus inaugurated the new covenant have seen God keep his greatest promises at the greatest cost to himself. Trusting God's life-restoring power, Abraham was prepared to perform a heart-wrenching act and received God's commendation: "You . . . have not withheld your son, your only son" (Gen. 22:16). His son was spared, replaced by a substitute that foreshadowed God's ultimate gift of faithful love: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32). When humanly impossible circumstances confront us as they did Abraham, our trembling hearts and fretful minds must be stilled to hear and heed our God's probing question: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Gen. 18:14).

HEBREWS 11:23–31

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷ By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king, for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. ²⁸ By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them.

²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days.

³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

Section Overview: Deliverance by Faith in the Exodus and Conquest

The life of Moses, the faithful servant in God's house and mediator of God's covenant at Sinai (Heb. 3:2–5; 9:18–22), exemplifies the *courage* and *costliness* of faith

(11:23–29). By faith his parents fearlessly protected their newborn son from the Egyptian king’s death warrant. By faith Moses himself, having reached adulthood, chose costly identification with God’s oppressed people over the privileges of Egypt’s royal court. Moses’ departure from Egypt was motivated not by fear of the king’s retribution but by a vision of the invisible God. Faith in the mercy and might of God was instrumental in the two great events of the exodus: the Passover protection of Israel’s firstborn and the parting of the Red Sea, opening Israel’s path to freedom.

The survey of specific OT instances of faith concludes with events that began the conquest of the Promised Land: the destruction of Jericho and the rescue of Rahab (vv. 30–31). After this, time constraints will necessitate consolidating and abbreviating the survey of faith and its fruit in the eras of Israel’s judges, kings, and exile (vv. 32–38).

Section Outline

- I. By faith Moses’ life displays courage and costliness (11:23–29)
 - A. As an infant, Moses was hidden by parents who did not fear the king (11:23)
 - B. As an adult, Moses chose the cost of sharing the reproach of Christ with God’s abused people (11:24–26)
 - C. Though he fled Egypt, Moses’ motive was not fear of the king but perception of the Lord (11:27)
 - D. Moses observed Passover, trusting God to spare Israel’s firstborn through the shedding of blood (11:28)
 - E. The Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry land, and then their enemies were drowned (11:29)
- II. By faith Jericho fell and Rahab was rescued (11:30–31)
 - A. God used an unlikely strategy to cause Jericho’s walls to fall (11:30)
 - B. God rescued an unlikely believer, Rahab the prostitute (11:31)

Comment

11:23 Although Moses is the grammatical subject of the passive verb “was hidden,” it was his parents’ courageous faith that set him apart in infancy. Recounting the narrative of Exodus 2:1–2, our author states that Moses’ parents hid him for three months because they saw that he was “beautiful” (Gk. *asteios*). Our author follows the LXX, in which *asteios* represents the Hebrew adjective *tov* (often glossed as “good,” but having a broad semantic range). In Acts 7:20 Stephen’s comment on Moses’ infancy likewise reflects the influence of the LXX, but he describes Moses as “beautiful [*asteios*] in God’s sight.”

In view of our author’s description of faith as focused on “things not seen” (Heb. 11:1), which reappears explicitly in the Moses section (v. 27), the reference to the infant Moses’ “beauty” refers to more than physical appearance. His parents “saw”

that there was something special about this child. The king's edict mandated that male infants of Hebrew mothers be killed at birth (Ex. 1:15–22). Presumably those who defied Pharaoh's semi-genocidal policy would themselves be punished, probably by death. Yet Moses' parents did not fear to protect this special child whom God had entrusted to them. Their fearlessness foreshadowed their son's fearlessness when facing the king's anger (Heb. 11:27) and illustrated how a living faith in God can set people free from the fear of death (2:15; cf. 13:6).

11:24–26 Our preacher is most interested in the life-changing decision that Moses reached when he had become an adult (Ex. 2:11–15; Acts 7:23). He had gone out to his brothers in order to see their burdensome toil. Suddenly he saw an Egyptian taskmaster cruelly beating a Hebrew slave—"one of his brothers" (ESV mg.; Moses' recognition of Hebrew slaves as his "brothers" is mentioned twice in Exodus 2:11, an emphasis that seems relevant to our author's interest in this incident.) In Exodus Moses himself records his action of killing the Egyptian abuser, thereby defending his Hebrew brother, without revealing his motivation.

Our author, however, insists that we contemplate the alternatives Moses confronted at that moment. Moses had been adopted by a daughter of Pharaoh, Egypt's quasi-divine monarch (Ex. 2:10). As a member of the royal court, Moses had access to the "treasures of Egypt" and could "enjoy the fleeting pleasures [*apolausis*] of sin." The term *apolausis* is not intrinsically negative (cf. 1 Tim. 6:17), but here it refers to pleasures that are both sinful and short-lived. Such ephemeral enjoyment would have included not only violations of God's moral law but also, especially relevant here, a culpable refusal to be identified with his suffering Hebrew kinfolk. On the other hand, although the children of Israel had been welcomed to Egypt with honor in Joseph's day, they had long been an enslaved, despised, and abused minority. To identify with them would be to suffer mistreatment with them (cf. Heb. 11:37; 13:3).

The alternatives are described first in terms of physical and social experience: either mistreatment or enjoyment. They are then restated in financial metaphors: either Egypt's "treasures," or the "greater wealth" and "reward" on which Moses' sights were set. In a doubly arresting move, our author identifies the "greater wealth" that Moses chose as "the reproach of Christ." It is a shocking paradox to equate *reproach* to *wealth*—and wealth exceeding that of Pharaoh's court. Moreover, the author seamlessly links afflictions endured by ancient Hebrew slaves to the suffering of "reproach" endured by the Messiah himself. The psalmists lamented the reproaches suffered by the Lord's Anointed (Pss. 69:7–9, 19–20; 89:50–51), and Hebrews will speak of the shame endured by Jesus on the cross (Heb. 12:2). His execution "outside the gate" and "outside the camp," in territory reserved for death and defilement, symbolized the reproach he endured, which his followers must share (13:11–13).

The sermon-letter's original Jewish-Christian hearers had already suffered reproach for their faith and had identified with others who had likewise suffered

(10:32–34). They will be called to do so again (13:3). For them, the choice was not between the luxuries of Egypt’s royal court and the helplessness and exhausting toil of a nation of slaves. Rather, it was between status and welcome in the Jewish community, synagogue, and near and extended family circles, on the one hand, and shunning by synagogue and family, with related social and economic ramifications, on the other. For every generation, bearing the reproach of Christ in solidarity with his faithful followers has its price, and the cost of enduring faith is not negligible. But Moses’ reckoning was right: Christ’s reproach is wealth that sin’s pleasures and society’s acceptance cannot rival. The reward is nothing less than drawing near and dwelling with God in the heavenly country and city to come (10:34–35; 11:6, 10, 16; 12:22–24, 28; 13:14).

11:27 A third display of faith in Moses’ life was his departure from Egypt, “not being afraid of the anger of the king.” Since this precedes the mention of the Passover (v. 28), it probably refers to Moses’ flight from Egypt to Midian soon after he killed an abusive Egyptian taskmaster and his act became public knowledge and reached the king’s ears (Ex. 2:14–15; cf. comment on 11:24–26). The OT text, however, states that, when the news got out, “Moses was afraid” and fled (Ex. 2:14).³⁵ How can our author so flatly contradict the OT? To attribute Moses’ flight from Egypt to his faith instead of to his fear of the king conveniently parallels our author’s treatment of Moses’ parents’ protection of him in infancy as being motivated by their faith in God, not their fear of the king. But surely a desire to highlight this parallel cannot justify our author’s deliberately suppressing the truth about his fear that Moses frankly confessed when he wrote Exodus. Our preacher’s point seems to be that, although Moses was afraid of the king’s wrath (as anyone familiar with the OT knows), his faith, not his fear, was the *dominant motive* driving him out of Egypt.

Our author assumes that his hearers have seen Moses’ struggle with fear in Exodus, just as we observed Abraham’s and Sarah’s fluctuating faith in Genesis. Over against that fear, however, was his faith, by which he “endured as seeing him who is invisible.” The invisible one is God the creator (Rom. 1:20; Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; 6:15–16). Forty years after Moses fled Egypt, he saw the angel of the Lord in the burning bush (Exodus 3–4) and the “form of the LORD” on Mount Sinai (Num. 12:8). But long before those *visible* displays of divine glory, Moses had already glimpsed God’s glory, by faith (not physical sight) perceiving “things not seen.” Our preacher assures us that Moses’ faith overshadowed his (very obvious) fear. By that same faith, all believers now “behold” the Lord’s glory and are being transformed into his image (2 Cor. 3:18).

11:28 Like Noah previously, Moses and Israel believed God’s announcement about a traumatic judgment to come in an unseen but fast approaching future: a final plague would inflict death on the firstborn throughout Egypt (Ex. 11:4–7). Like

³⁵ Moses narrated embarrassing details that reveal his timidity even when he defended his suffering Hebrew brother. Before resisting the abusive Egyptian, Moses “looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (Ex. 2:12).

Noah, in their faith they obeyed God's instruction for their protection, smearing the blood of a lamb "without blemish" on their doorframes and eating the Passover meal in their homes (Ex. 12:3–13). Acting in faith preserved their lives (Heb. 10:39), as God had promised: "The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you" (Ex. 12:13). As the blood of bulls and goats on the Day of Atonement foreshadowed Christ's conscience-cleansing sacrifice, so the Passover lamb's blood symbolized Jesus' death as the means of rescue from the enslaving fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15; 9:13–14; cf. John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7).

11:29 Another rescue immediately followed the first Passover. The final plague forced Egypt's Pharaoh to release his Hebrew slaves, but immediately he regretted that decision and sent forces to recapture the Israelites, who had reached the Red Sea and were trapped between impassable waters and implacable foes (Exodus 14). Fear, not faith, fueled their words of complaint against Moses (Ex. 14:11–12), ominously foreshadowing the next forty years. Nevertheless, "by faith" they crossed the sea as on dry ground (Ex. 14:21–22, 29), and, when the waters returned, their oppressors were drowned (Ex. 14:26–28). This visible display of power evoked from the Israelites a confession of faith, short-lived though it would be: "Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they *believed* in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (Ex. 14:31).

11:30–31 Our author bypasses major events he discusses elsewhere: the inauguration of the Sinai covenant (Heb. 9:15–22; 12:18–21) and the Israelites' four decades of doubt in the desert (chs. 3–4). He concludes this section with two simultaneous displays of God's power and mercy when a new generation of Israelites finally entered the Promised Land. The sudden fall of Jericho's walls illustrates our preacher's point that the faith that pleases God takes action in response to God's word, even when visible circumstances make his commands seem foolish and his promises impossible. The Lord directed Israel's priests—sounding trumpets and bearing the ark of the covenant—and its armed forces to march around Jericho once a day for six days, and seven times on the seventh day, before shouting and again blasting trumpets (Josh. 6:1–21). But Jericho was a formidable fortress, securely sealed against siege (Josh. 6:1). Such a bizarre military strategy—no battering ram to shatter gates, no ladders to scale walls—must have seemed unlikely to breach Jericho's stout battlements. But Joshua had just led Israel through the Jordan River on dry land in flood season (Joshua 3–4), so Israel again proceeded in obedience, trusting God's word about things not yet seen, and they watched their divine champion throw down Jericho's walls.

While Jericho was overthrown, Rahab the prostitute (with her family; Josh. 6:22–25) was spared "by faith." Despite her background in Canaan's pagan religions, this Gentile woman's faith in the living God of Israel was robust in content, informed by reports of the Lord's prior victories (Josh. 2:8–13). Her trust was both active and risky. Jeopardizing her own and her family's safety from harm by human

powers, she secured their deliverance from destruction by the Lord, expecting that he would fulfill his promise to give his land to his people. If she had been caught giving “a friendly welcome” (lit., “welcome with peace”) to the Israelite spies, no doubt Jericho’s authorities would have executed her (Josh. 2:2–7). Her hope lay not in her own virtue but in the trustworthy word of God. Thus the Bible identifies Rahab as “the prostitute” while nevertheless commending her exemplary faith (Josh. 2:1; 6:17, 22, 25; James 2:25). She is one of four women with Gentile associations enfolded into the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, along with Tamar, Ruth, and Uriah’s wife (Matt. 1:1–16).

Response

The OT portraits of Moses and Rahab differ widely, yet their stories converge to show us that the faith that delights God is both costly and courageous. Honored by God above all other prophets, Moses had privileged access to God’s glorious presence. Yet the self-portrait Moses offers in the Pentateuch exposes the fear mingled with his faith. Rahab, a pagan prostitute, exercised fearless faith and received the Lord’s rescue. Her confidence that God would give his people the Promised Land set her apart from “those who were disobedient,” not only in idolatrous Jericho but also in Israel (cf. Heb. 3:18; 4:6; Josh. 7:1). We too must look beyond the fleeting pleasures of sin and the threats of rejection and persecution, setting our sights on the living God, too glorious to be seen by human eyes, and the reward he will bestow (Heb. 11:24–27).

HEBREWS 11:32–40

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets—³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions,³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment.³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two,¹ they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

³⁹ And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised,⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

¹ Some manuscripts add *they were tempted*

Section Overview: Victory, Suffering, and Future Hope by Faith

As he concludes his survey of faith in the lives of OT saints, our preacher, mindful of time constraints and his hearers' mental stamina, changes his approach. Instead of recounting events one by one, he abbreviates by mentioning some judges, a king, and a prophet by name and then briefly sketching both their achievements, enabled by faith, and their afflictions, endured by faith. Verse 35 is the pivot point in this overview. The resurrection of the dead, restored to the women who mourned them, is the climax of the achievements over enemies that God granted to those who trusted him (vv. 33–35a). The courage of those tortured to their deaths for their faith then opens a series of afflictions endured by the faithful, without relief or release (vv. 35b–38). Finally, a summary of all of the ancients commended for their faith in the OT makes the point that, whether the Lord granted them visible rescue in their lifetimes or called them to enduring hope amid affliction, they did not receive the fullness of God's promises. That fullness awaited the arrival of Christ, who has brought OT and NT believers together to "perfection," the cleansing of conscience that opens access to God (vv. 39–40).

Section Outline

- I. Through faith some—too many to recount—won victories over God's enemies (11:32–35a)
 - A. Their company included judges, kings, and prophets (11:32)
 - B. They conquered human enemies (11:33–34)
 - C. They saw God conquer death, the last enemy (11:35a)
- II. Through faith others persevered under sufferings, without relief (11:35b–38)
 - A. They endured torture and death, anticipating a better resurrection (11:35b–37a)
 - B. They endured homelessness and destitution, anticipating a better homeland (11:37b–38)
- III. Whether victorious or suffering, all these died in faith, awaiting the perfection that we now share with them through Jesus (11:39–40)

Comment

11:32 Our preacher is mindful of the length of time that would be involved in listening to his sermon-letter being read aloud. He has already abbreviated what could have been a longer discussion of the tabernacle's furniture (9:5). Now he condenses the rest of OT history's profiles of faith, since "time would fail me" to discuss in detail the stories of Israel's judges, kings, and prophets after the conquest of the Promised Land. He will draw attention to his restraint in his final greetings as a reason for his hearers to "bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly" (13:22).

The names of judges (Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah), a king (David), and a prophet (Samuel) would bring their stories to the minds of Jewish listeners.

The names are not in strict chronological order. In the OT, Barak (Judges 4–5) appears before Gideon (Judges 6–8), and Jephthah (Judges 11–12) before Samson (Judges 13–16). Then Samuel, Israel’s last judge as well as a prophet (1 Samuel 1–25), appears before David (1 Samuel 16–2 Samuel 24). Perhaps in each pair the more prominent individual is mentioned first. It is also fitting to list “Samuel and the prophets” last, since Samuel is viewed as the head of those prophets following Moses, who pressed the Lord’s lawsuit against Israel for their breach of covenant while promising God’s continuing faithfulness to his unfaithful people (Acts 3:24). Each of the six “through faith conquered kingdoms,” “enforced justice” (in varying degrees), “became mighty in war,” and “put foreign armies to flight” (Heb. 11:33–34), defending Israel against surrounding enemies such as the Canaanites, Midianites, Ammonites, and Philistines.

Nevertheless, although our author highlights the faith of these men, the OT accounts present blemished portraits of the judges and of King David. Like Moses, Gideon strove to evade God’s call to courageous leadership (Judg. 6:11–40; cf. Exodus 3–4). Barak timidly refused to take up arms without the support of the judge-prophet Deborah (Judg. 4:6–8). Samson scorned his holy status as a Nazirite, wielding his extraordinary strength more often in service to his own sensual lust and rage than in submission to his God (Judg. 14:1–4, 8–9, 19–20; 15:1–8; 16:1–17). Jephthah rashly vowed away his daughter’s life in exchange for victory in battle, and then even more wickedly kept his vow, contrary to God’s law (Judg. 11:29–40; cf. Ex. 13:15; Deut. 12:29–31; 18:10). David waged war in the name of the Lord (1 Sam. 17:45) but later shamed the Lord’s name through adultery and murder, bringing rape and bloodshed into his own family and civil war to Israel (2 Samuel 11–18). Even Samuel apparently replicated the paternal negligence of the priest who had raised him, so that his sons turned out as badly as Eli’s (1 Sam. 2:12–17, 22–36; 8:1–4).

If the author had intended to convey the impression that God commended OT figures who were stalwart in trust and spotless in character, he might have selected judges described so briefly that their flaws remained unmentioned (such as Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar; Judges 3) or a king such as Josiah, distinguished for his righteous reforms (2 Kings 22–23; but see 2 Chron. 35:20–22). Instead our preacher calls us to listen to God as he testifies on behalf of patriarchs, politicians, prophets, and prostitutes who had fluctuating faith and questionable morality but who continued to trust God to be faithful to his promises. If they could act in faith and see God work, so could the sermon-letter’s first hearers, some of whom had “drooping hands” and “weak knees” (Heb. 12:12–13)—and so can we in our trials and frailty.

11:33–34 The overview of faith’s victories after the conquest of Canaan includes military victories against Israel’s hostile neighbors: these heroes “conquered kingdoms, . . . were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.” In addition to the leaders named in verse 32, God granted

triumph in battle to other judges, to Jonathan son of Saul, and to Judah's later kings. Justice was administered by judges such as Deborah and Samuel (Judg. 4:4–5; 1 Sam. 8:1–7; 12:1–5) and by kings such as David and Solomon (2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 3). Although we cannot overlook the defects of those named in verse 32, we must not underestimate the faith involved in Gideon's waging war against Midian with a brigade reduced from thousands to three hundred, or in Samson's single-handed slaughter of Philistines, or in young David's confrontation with the well-armed Philistine champion Goliath.

Those who "obtained promises" would include David, to whom the Lord promised an ongoing dynasty (cf. 2 Sam. 7:11–13). Like Abraham, who received an initial fulfillment of God's promise of offspring in the birth of Isaac (cf. comment on Heb. 6:15), so other OT believers who awaited the *fulfillment* of promises Christ would bring (8:6; 11:39–40) received preliminary installments of the redemption for which they hoped (e.g., David's son Solomon would build God's house; 2 Sam. 7:12–13; 1 Kings 6).

Various OT believers were delivered from violent death. Samson and David "stopped the mouths of lions" by killing them (cf. Judg. 14:5–6; 1 Sam. 17:34–37), but the wording here echoes Daniel: "My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths." Daniel emerged unharmed "because he had trusted in his God" (Dan. 6:22–23). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego "quenched the power of fire" (cf. Daniel 3). David "escaped the edge of the sword" (cf. 1 Sam. 17:45–51), as did prophets such as Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah, who had no weapons in hand to defend themselves but relied on their faith in God (1 Kings 19:1–3; 2 Kings 6:30–7:20; Jer. 26:7–24).

11:35 The capstone of the rescues received by OT people of faith was deliverance from death itself, the "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). During a famine, the prophet Elijah sojourned with a Gentile widow and her son in Zarephath, and the Lord sustained her meager store of food through the prophet's presence. When her son fell ill and died, God granted Elijah's plea to restore the child to life (1 Kings 17:8–24). His successor, Elisha, received hospitality from a Shunammite couple, and God granted them a son in answer to the prophet's prayer. When the boy suddenly fell ill and died, the Lord returned him to life and to his mother through the prophet's intercession (2 Kings 4:8–37).

Suddenly, in the middle of verse 35, the Greek syntax signals a thematic shift: "But others [*alloi de*] were tortured [*tympanizō*], not accepting release, in order that they might obtain a *better resurrection*." Abraham had received Isaac back in a metaphorical [*en parabolē*] resurrection (Heb. 11:19), and the mothers of Zarephath and Shunem received sons back in physical revivification. But by faith others endured torture that ended in death, anticipating a new life in the age to come, from which suffering, sorrow, and death will be banished altogether. Those who refused the offer of release because they hoped for a better resurrection may allude specifically to the account of the torture and martyrdom of the aged scribe Eleazar and a

family of seven brothers at the hands of the Syrian tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes, reported in the apocryphal book of *2 Maccabees*. This account mentions the rack (*tympanon*) as an instrument of torture, and the brothers' mother encourages them to endure suffering faithfully, expressing to the youngest her hope that "in God's mercy I may get you back again along with your brothers" (*2 Macc.* 7:29).³⁶

11:36–38 Persecutions less extreme than martyrdom—"mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment" (v. 36)—were endured by the prophets as a group (2 Chron. 36:15–16; cf. Mark 12:2–5), including by some to extreme lengths (1 Kings 22:24–27; Jer. 20:2; 37:15–16). These afflictions, the price of bearing the "reproach of Christ" (Heb. 11:26; cf. 13:13), were akin to those that the original audience of Hebrews had borne in the past and were confronting in the present (10:32–34; 13:3). In the first Christian generation, Jesus' apostles and followers endured such hardships, regarding themselves honored when suffering contempt for the sake of his name (Acts 5:40–41; 8:3; 9:1–2; 16:22–24; 2 Cor. 11:23–27). OT martyrs were slain by stones, saws, and swords. Judah's king Joash had learned God's law from the faithful priest Jehoiada, but after his mentor's death, Joash forsook the Lord. When confronted by Jehoiada's son Zechariah, the king ordered his death by stoning (2 Chron. 24:17–22). Jewish tradition reported that the prophet Isaiah was put to death by being sawn in half on the orders of King Manasseh. Rulers of both Israel in the north (1 Kings 19:10) and Judah in the south (Jer. 26:20–23) cut faithful prophets down with the sword for speaking the Lord's troublesome words of judgment.

Even those not called to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom endured a lifestyle of deprivation and marginalization, alienation and exclusion befitting their identity as "strangers and exiles on the earth" (Heb. 11:13). Their destitution, clothing ("skins of sheep and goats"), and homeless "wandering about in deserts and mountains" showed they had no status or security in society (cf. 1 Kings 17:3–7; 2 Kings 1:8; Matt. 3:1–4). They were expelled "outside the camp" (Heb. 13:11–13; cf. comments on 13:11–12; 13:13–14). Their shelter, such as it was, in "dens and caves" (cf. Judg. 6:2; 1 Sam. 13:6; 1 Kings 18:4), foreshadowed the plight of the original audience of Hebrews, whose property had been seized (Heb. 10:34).

Our author would concur with the apostle Paul's assessment that Christ's apostles—and, in fact, all of Jesus' followers—are regarded by those outside the church as "scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Cor. 4:13). The faith that pleases God, however, since it is the demonstrable evidence of things not seen (Heb. 11:1), provides a radically different perspective. It enabled Moses to assess the reproach of Christ, endured in solidarity with God's mistreated people, as greater wealth than Egypt's treasures (vv. 25–26). Such faith reveals that these outcasts, whom the world despised, were actually the people "of whom the world was not worthy" (v. 38). They were heirs destined for a far better homeland than this world has to offer: a heavenly country (v. 16).

³⁶ *The English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

11:39–40 The discourse on God-pleasing faith began with the announcement that those ancient believers whose lives we read of in the OT were “commended” by God (11:2), and it closes as it opened. By inscribing their stories into his Scriptures, God still bears testimony that these saints were righteous, for they lived by persevering faith (10:36–39). God “commended” Abel and Enoch (11:4, 5) and all those who lived by faith, hoping for the arrival of Christ in redemptive history. Some tasted partial and provisional fulfillments of God’s promise, but on the whole they “did not receive what was promised,” for the “something better” that God provided for us is the new and better covenant, inaugurated on better promises by the blood of Jesus (8:6–12; 9:13–15). By his blood both they who pre-hoped in the Messiah (Eph. 1:12) and we who hear him speaking salvation “in these last days” (Heb. 1:1–2; 2:3–4) are together perfected, cleansed, and qualified to draw near to God.

Response

Our preacher concludes his survey of OT history with an avalanche of vignettes graphically portraying the *costs* of living by faith in God: mockery and mistreatment, destitution and alienation, homelessness, abuse, torture, and death. Our cultural contexts, as well as our own hearts, often incline us to weigh the “pros” and “cons” of entrusting ourselves wholly to Jesus in terms of the tangible outcomes that may appear in the short run. When the reward is distant and the price to be paid is very present and painfully high, we feel pressured to conform and blend in. But Jesus called his followers to swim upstream against the downward current of the culture around them. The ancient exemplars of faith, for all their flaws, held fast to a hope in things not yet seen, considering the God who promised to be faithful and the reward worth receiving, whatever the cost. Both their testimony to God’s faithfulness and his testimony to their faith challenge our self-centered and frivolous conceptions of faith, calling us instead to lifelong endurance, with our eyes fixed steadfastly on Jesus and our hearts resolved to follow him to the end, by the grace he supplies.

HEBREWS 12:1–11

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴In your struggle against

sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.

⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Section Overview: Look to Jesus, and Endure God's Fatherly Discipline

The exhortation to enduring faith, grounded in Habakkuk 2:3–4 (Heb. 10:35–39) and illustrated in the lives of OT saints (11:1–40), is now repeated and elaborated. *Endurance* is a theme pervading this section, both explicitly (12:1, 2, 3, 7) and implicitly, in the warnings against weariness and faintheartedness (vv. 3, 5, and cf. vv. 12–13). The summons to “run with endurance” is supported by the testimony of a “cloud of witnesses” who attest to God’s faithfulness, and it is grounded in the vision of “Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith” (AT), who endured the cross and now sits at God’s right hand. Suffering for their faith apparently daunted the original hearers. The remedy is to appreciate more fully the shame and pain Jesus endured and to remember the encouraging perspective on sufferings provided in Proverbs: our sufferings are signs that God acknowledges us as sons and cares enough to discipline us. *Discipline* is thus the other theme interwoven throughout this exhortation (vv. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11). God’s goal for such painful discipline is our benefit: to conform us to his character in holiness, peace, and righteousness. So we must endure in hope.

Section Outline

- I. Consider Jesus’ sufferings and endurance, which provide perspective on your adversity (12:1–4)
 - A. Run with endurance, because a cloud of OT witnesses attests God’s faithfulness (12:1)
 - B. Fix your attention on Jesus, who endured the severest suffering on the cross (12:2–4)

- II. God's painful discipline confirms that you are beloved sons and serves his good purposes for you (12:5–11)
 - A. God exhorts you as sons to recognize his painful discipline as proof of his love (12:5–8)
 - B. If we respected finite human fathers for disciplining us, we should much more submit to the Father who disciplines us for a greater goal (12:9–10)
 - C. Though painful in the present, discipline yields peaceful fruit in the end (12:11)

Comment

12:1 An emphatic “Therefore” shows that the survey of OT people of faith is the basis for the exhortation “Let us run with endurance.” They are “so great a cloud of witnesses [*martyrōn*]” because they testify from the pages of Scripture that God is faithful (11:11). Abel, Enoch, and others were those on whose behalf God was testifying (*martyreō*; ESV “commended”) in his Word (11:2, 4, 5, 39). Now our author turns things around: those ancient believers bear witness on God's behalf, affirming that he can be trusted. Their testimony should give us stamina to endure in our race. They may also be spectators who are observing the hearers' performance, but the writer's use of “witness” terminology favors the sense that they are actively testifying: Abel, “though he died, . . . still speaks,” as do others (11:4; cf. 11:13–14).

Our preacher evokes athletic imagery drawn from the ancient Panhellenic games, precursors of our modern Olympics. He previously described Jesus as our “forerunner” (6:20). Now he calls his hearers to strip off every encumbering “weight” and run the “race” on the course set out before them. He will refer to being “trained” by discipline (12:11) and will apply the metaphor of runners' injuries to spiritual disabilities (vv. 12–13). In this imagery the “weight” to be stripped away could be training weights or encumbering clothing. Perhaps clothing is in view, since “lay aside” (*apotithēmi*) elsewhere refers to disrobing (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:8), and “trained” (*gymnazō*) in Hebrews 12:11 alludes to the Greek athletic practice of competing unclothed (*gymnos*). The weight to be discarded symbolizes “sin which clings so closely.” The sin to which the original hearers were especially tempted was not only violation of God's moral commands (12:16; 13:4) but also apostatizing from their allegiance to Christ under the threat of persecution (10:26–39). Their “struggle against sin,” which had not yet escalated to bloodshed, was a struggle to hold fast their faith (12:4).

12:2 Although the voices of OT witnesses should encourage us, the key to endurance in the race is looking to the “founder and perfecter” of faith, Jesus. (The Greek word order here, as in 2:9; 3:1; 4:14; 6:20; and 7:22, builds hearers' anticipation by first *describing* the Savior before finally *naming* him.) “Founder” (*archēgos*) has a range of meanings (cf. comment on 2:10). Often in the LXX it refers to Israel's

tribal heads and military commanders. Here, as the “founder” of faith as well as its “perfecter (*teleiōtēs*),” Jesus is not only faith’s preeminent exemplar, overshadowing the OT people of faith, but also the originator and object of our faith. He initiates our faith, runs faith’s race ahead of us, and brings our faith to its goal. In the OT era believers were not yet “made perfect [*teleiōō*]” (11:40), because the system of sacrifices administered by Aaronic priests “made nothing perfect” (7:11, 19). But now Jesus’ sacrifice has “perfected for all time” those who trust him (10:14), opening access into God’s holy presence.

Jesus set the pace of enduring faith. His faith is expressed in his words cited from Isaiah 8:17 in Hebrews 2:13: “I will put my trust in him.” For sinful people, saving faith involves reliance on Jesus’ blood and righteousness as we recognize our own unworthiness. But for Jesus, the sinless priest and unblemished sacrifice, faith was his trust in his Father’s assurance that, after he fulfilled God’s will through death on the cross, his cries for deliverance from death would be “heard” and answered in his resurrection (5:7–10; 7:26–28; 10:10; 13:20). Jesus’ trust in the Father’s promise was thus expressed in his readiness to endure the cross, “despising the shame.” He made that costly choice “for the joy that was set before him.” The Greek preposition rendered “for” (*anti*) frequently means “instead of” (e.g., Matt. 2:22; 5:38; 20:28), and the verb “set before” (*prokeimai*) was just used to describe the racetrack *immediately* ahead of us (cf. 2 Cor. 8:12). So it has been argued that the author means that, instead of a joyful rescue that Jesus could have experienced immediately (Matt. 26:53), he chose instead the reproach of crucifixion. Moses’ reckoning the reproach of Christ as greater wealth than Egypt’s treasures foreshadowed Christ’s own valuation of even more extreme alternatives (Heb. 11:26).

On the other hand, according to the ESV, other versions, and most commentators, Jesus endured the cross and its shame *for the sake of* the joy awaiting him *beyond his suffering*—the joy of being “seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” This interpretation fits the only other use in Hebrews of the preposition *anti*, a few verses later: Esau “sold his birthright for [*anti* = not “instead of” but “for the sake of obtaining”] a single meal” (12:16). Thus Moses resembled Jesus in a different sense: he was “looking to the reward” (11:26). Our author is about to urge his hearers to endure painful suffering in anticipation of its future fruit (12:11). Jesus shows them how and why.

The shame of execution on a cross was well known across the Greco-Roman world among both pagans and Jews, for whom it bore the added stigma of God’s curse (Deut. 21:22–23; 1 Cor. 1:18–25; Gal. 3:13; cf. Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29). Jesus’ suffering on the cross, however, transformed its shame and reproach (Heb. 13:12–13) into an occasion for Christian boasting (Gal. 6:14). Believers can rejoice in their own mistreatment and “dishonor for the name,” realizing that God has counted them “worthy” to be identified with their Lord (Acts 5:41). As increasing intimidation and opposition loomed on their horizon, the hearers of this letter, who had already endured public reproach (Heb. 10:32–33), needed to recall that Jesus had borne shame as he suffered for them.

12:3–4 To look to Jesus is to consider him with focused, thoughtful reflection. The author directs our attention not to the cross's physical torments but to the "hostility" of "sinners" that assaulted Jesus as he died (Mark 15:18–20, 29–32). His endurance in the face of such spiteful repudiation should hearten believers who are tempted to "grow weary or fainthearted" when ostracized by their families or the wider community. "Grow weary" reflects a Greek term (*kamnō*) that expresses weakness or sickness (cf. James 5:15). To be "fainthearted" (*eklyomai*) is to suffer exhaustion. Those who are "fainthearted" physically may fail to reach their destination (Mark 8:3), and those who suffer spiritual exhaustion are prone to discouragement (Gal. 6:9). The term "fainthearted" is the bridge into the encouragement offered in Proverbs 3, which our preacher is about to cite in verses 5b–6 (there translated "be weary").

The hearers' necessary "struggle against sin" is specifically their need to resist the sin of apostasy (cf. Heb. 10:26–39). This is why the preacher notes that their struggle has not yet escalated to the "point of shedding your blood." Our preacher has pointed out that Jesus has rescued us from the fear of death (2:14–15), and he has catalogued the losses endured by OT believers (11:35–38). His hearers were probably being pressured by intimidation, ostracism, and physical threats to renounce their confession of faith in Jesus. So far the persecution had not reached the extreme of martyrdom (though cf. comment on 13:7). In this respect, their sufferings cannot be compared with the ultimate price paid by Jesus, who shed his blood to purify their consciences and draw them near to God (9:14; 10:19, 29). Meditating on *his* sacrifice would put their own trials into perspective, fortifying their hearts against self-pity and hopelessness.

12:5–6 Contributing to the hearers' dismay over the opposition they were receiving was their forgetfulness of the "exhortation," or "encouragement" (*paraklēsis*), that God spoke to them as sons. Again our preacher assumes that the OT (here, Prov. 3:11–12) is not merely a text inscribed in a bygone generation but also is the Holy Spirit's speech to us in our "today" (Heb. 3:7, 13; 10:15–17). The *paraklēsis/parakaleō* word group, prominent throughout Hebrews (cf. 13:22), has a semantic range that includes stern exhortation (admonition) but also warm encouragement (comfort). Here the tone of the Proverbs citation and the author's application favor the sense of heartening "encouragement."

Proverbs 3:11 seems to describe different reactions to the Lord's discipline, on the one hand "regard[ing it] lightly" and on the other "be[ing] weary." The first response is that of an arrogant son who ignores his father's discipline; the second is that of an insecure son who construes his father's reproof as personal rejection. In fact, both reactions demonstrate forgetfulness of the truth of Proverbs 3:12: "The Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises³⁷ every son whom he receives." Those who respond to adversities either by challenging God's authority

37 Hebrews follows the LXX, which inserts the verb *mastigōō* ("chastises," often "beats" or "flogs"), which has no counterpart in the Hebrew text of Proverbs 3:11–12.

or by doubting his good purpose have forgotten that such sufferings are tokens of his love and of their legitimacy as his sons. The situation envisioned in Proverbs is fatherly correction when a son misbehaves (cf. Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13–14). Our author of Hebrews widens the perspective to include afflictions suffered as the consequence of faithfulness in resisting sin. Those who suffer for righteousness' sake, no less than those disciplined to wean them from sin, can be assured that their pains serve their Father's loving purpose for them (Matt. 5:10–12).

12:7–8 Both the noun “discipline” (*paideia*) and the cognate verb appear in the Proverbs citation, and now “discipline” sums up God's paternal purpose that makes endurance both possible and obligatory. The form of the Greek verb “endure” (*hypomenete*) could be in either the indicative mood (“you are enduring”) or the imperative (“you must endure”). The ESV's “you have to endure” nicely conveys this ambiguity, leaning toward the imperative: hearers must endure because “God is treating you as sons.” In the Greco-Roman world it was not unusual for a nobleman to subject his legitimate son and heir to a rigorous upbringing under the severe tutelage of a guardian, since the future of the father's name and estate would rest with the son (Gal. 4:1–2). Meanwhile, illegitimate children, since they did not bear their father's name nor stand to inherit his property, might be left without moral discipline. To be spared God's painful discipline is indicative not of his favor but of his indifference and rejection.

12:9–10 When we recognize how God's painful discipline reveals his loving acceptance and our legitimacy as his children and heirs, this perspective will affect our attitude toward him amid our afflictions. The preacher draws an analogy to human family dynamics in another *a fortiori* (*qal v'homer*, “light and heavy”) argument (cf. comment on 2:2–4). The point of comparison is clear: when a son recognizes that his father's discipline, however difficult to bear at the moment, springs from a desire for the son's well-being, the son respects (that is, humbles himself before; *entrepō*) such a father. The verb *entrepō* in the passive voice means to “be humbled” and in the middle voice means to “humble oneself” before another person (Ex. 10:3 LXX; Titus 2:8)—that is, to acknowledge that person's greater honor (Luke 18:2, 4). That principle is all the more applicable in our response to the discipline God imposes on us, since it is better than that of human fathers in three ways:

- (1) Human fathers were “fathers of our *flesh*” (ESV = “earthly fathers”), whereas God is the “Father of *spirits*” (echoing Num. 16:22; 27:16).
- (2) Human fathers “disciplined us for a short time,” whereas God works throughout our lives to remold our characters through painful discipline.
- (3) Human fathers exercised discipline “as it seemed best to them” in their finite and fallen perspective, whereas in his infinite wisdom God infallibly knows what is for our benefit (*to sympheron*), namely, “that we may share his holiness.”

The more we remember that our painful circumstances are orchestrated by God in his infinite wisdom, sovereign control, and fatherly love, the better we will bear his discipline in hopeful endurance.

12:11 The encouraging assurance God speaks to his sons does not anesthetize us against the pain of present afflictions. Our preacher frankly admits that, when it is happening, discipline “seems painful rather than pleasant”—or, to reflect the strength of the contrast: “not joyful [*chara*] but grief-filled [*lypē*].” Paul uses the same contrast to express the hope that, on an impending visit to Corinth, he will not “suffer pain [*lypē*] from those who should have made me rejoice [*chairō*” (2 Cor. 2:3). Enduring faith must look beyond the painful present to the fruitful future, grasping the reality of things hoped for, the evidence of things not yet seen (Heb. 11:1). Our preacher joins his voice to the chorus of NT authors who, inspired by God’s Spirit, assure us that our “light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17; cf. John 16:33; Rom. 8:17–18; 1 Pet. 1:6–7).

To strengthen hope in the face of present pain, the preacher mixes agricultural and athletic metaphors (cf. 2 Tim. 2:3–6). As farmers till soil and sow seed in anticipation of a future crop, so those undergoing God’s wise and loving discipline should patiently expect a later harvest of the “peaceful fruit of righteousness.” The author of Hebrews, along with James and Paul, all seem to have drawn this farming metaphor from Isaiah 32:16–18 and other OT texts (James 3:18; 5:7–8; Phil. 1:11; cf. Prov. 11:18; Hos. 10:12). Then, shifting back to the athletic imagery with which he opened this exhortation, our preacher speaks of those who “have been trained” (*gymnazō*) by the Lord’s discipline. Alongside the apparent passivity of farmland he reintroduces the picture of strenuous human exercise in training and then running the race set before us (cf. 1 Tim. 4:7–8). Enduring faith is strenuous effort springing from assurance of God’s fatherly love, and therefore it sprints with the strength he supplies “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). Moreover, this is not a solo race but a team sport, in which every member must attend to others’ weak knees and disabled joints (as our preacher will carry the athletic metaphor forward in Heb. 12:12–13).

Response

In every generation Christians face opposition that works against lifelong perseverance in following Jesus. Sometimes the “hostility of sinners” is expressed verbally and socially. Sometimes matters escalate to financial hardship, physical harm, imprisonment, and even death. But God gives us strong reasons to run with endurance the race of faith laid out in front of us: the abundant testimony of those who ran ahead of us; the courageous example and loving self-sacrifice of faith’s founder and perfecter, Jesus; and the Father’s encouragement that our present pains as we struggle to hold fast to faith signal his loving acceptance and fit his flawless plan for our eternal well-being. Looking to Jesus and recalling our Father’s encouragement supply the stamina to run the race to the finish line.

HEBREWS 12:12–17

¹²Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed. ¹⁴Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; ¹⁶that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

Section Overview: Exhortation: Cultivate Endurance through Christian Community

The author continues his exhortation to endurance, extending his athletic metaphor of training (12:11) and running a race (v. 1) with instructions to fortify weakened and wounded limbs and joints (vv. 12–13). These verses form a bridge between the preceding paragraph and what follows, transitioning to a focus on believers’ *corporate* responsibility to support one another in the lifelong marathon of faith, an obligation that has already been discussed (3:12–14; 4:1; 10:24–25). This exhortation is reinforced by OT allusions. The imagery of physical therapy for injured limbs and joints, echoing Isaiah 35:3–4, illustrates the congregation’s obligation to care for its weak and wounded members and to follow “straight paths” toward the goal (cf. Prov. 4:26).

Because the church is to be characterized by unity and purity, its members must pursue peace and holiness (Ps. 34:14). The community’s members and leaders must be on the lookout for three types of individuals who would inject toxins into the body of Christ, putting others’ health at risk: (1) the *doubter*, who “fails to obtain the grace of God” by hardening his heart rather than heeding God’s voice; (2) the *defiant* “root of bitterness” (cf. Deut. 29:18–19), who imagines that God will not detect his secret stubbornness; and (3) the *devotee* of immediate gratification, who, like Esau, prefers sating his physical appetites above waiting for God’s future blessing (Genesis 25–27).

Section Outline

- I. Support weak and wounded runners in the race (12:12–13)
 - A. Strengthen feeble members (12:12)
 - B. Stabilize disabled members (12:13)

- II. Strive for peace and holiness (12:14)
- III. See to it that your communion is free of the doubter, the defiant, and the devotee of immediate gratification (12:15–17)
 - A. The doubter, who falls short of God's grace (12:15a)
 - B. The defiant, who defiles many (12:15b)
 - C. The devotee of immediate gratification, who prefers his present cravings to God's future blessing (12:16–17)

Comment

12:12–13 “Trained” (*gymnazō*) in verse 11 recalled the athletic imagery of verse 1: hearers must discard everything that would hinder their running the lifelong race of faith on the course set out before them. Their endurance is threatened by “sin” (vv. 1, 4) and by their “weariness” in the face of opposition (cf. v. 3). Now our preacher extends the sport symbolism, exhorting the whole congregation to strengthen its weakened members, drawing imagery from Isaiah. The symbolism of “weak hands” and “feeble knees” was interpreted in the prophecy itself: “Say to those who have *an anxious heart*: ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance . . . and save you’” (Isa. 35:3–5; cf. Heb. 12:3). When God comes, blessings will abound, including the healing of the lame so that they will leap like the deer (Isa. 35:6; cf. also Hab. 3:19; Zeph. 3:16–19). The promise of God's *coming* with *vengeance* and in saving grace connects this passage with OT texts quoted earlier (Heb. 10:30–31, 37–38, citing Deut. 32:35–36; Hab. 2:3–4). The context of Isaiah's summons to strengthen limp hands and quivering knees shows that these are not bare commands but are encouragements grounded in the promise that our divine defender is coming.

The ESV uses two verbs, “lift” and “strengthen,” to represent a single Greek verb (*anorthōō*), which has two objects, “drooping hands” and “weak knees.” The Greek verb conveys not only strengthening but also straightening (Ps. 145:14; Luke 13:13), and so it serves as a bridge to another pertinent OT text, Proverbs 4:26 LXX, which our preacher introduces in Hebrews 12:13: “Make straight [*orthas*] paths for your feet.” Paths that further healing, rather than dislocation, must be “straight” in two senses. First, they must be *level*, free of stumbling stones or pitfalls that would compound injury to a twisted ankle or wrenched knee (Isa. 40:4). But they also must *run straight* toward the finish line, not leading runners astray (Prov. 4:27 LXX).

Such paths will keep what is lame from being twisted—in two ways. First, on such paths the lame will not be “put out of joint,” twisted to the point of dislocation, but rather will be “healed.” The verb rendered “put out of joint” (*ektrepō*) often describes straying “off course” from the way that leads to life (1 Tim. 1:6; 5:15; 2 Tim. 4:4). Hebrews adjusts the wording of Proverbs 4:26 LXX, changing the number of the verb “make straight” and of the possessive pronoun “your” from singular to plural, transforming a father's advice to an individual son into an exhortation to an entire congregation. When Christians are spiritually weak

(drooping hands, feeble knees) or disabled (lame), fellow believers must gather around them, clearing away obstacles and pointing them straight ahead to the finish line.

12:14 Verses 14–16 form one sentence in Greek. Its main clause is “Strive for peace . . . and . . . holiness.” Then a subordinate clause introduced by the participle “seeing to it” (*episkopountes*) at the beginning of verse 15 shows how these virtues are preserved and promoted, namely, by watching out for three threats to the church’s peace and purity (vv. 15–16).

The straight path is marked by two virtues to be pursued (*diōkō*; ESV “strive for”): peace and holiness. “Strive for peace” echoes Psalm 34:14 (33:15 LXX; cf. 1 Pet. 3:10–12). NT authors instruct believers to live peacefully with each other (Mark 9:50; Rom. 14:19; 2 Cor. 13:11; 2 Tim. 2:22). Here, however, the command is to “strive for peace with *everyone*.” This broader peacemaking obligation also has parallels elsewhere in the NT (Matt. 5:9–11; Rom. 12:14–21; 1 Cor. 7:15). The gospel shows that our peacemaking and peacekeeping, both with each other and with outside opponents, flow from the peacemaking sacrifice of Jesus (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:14–18) and the heart-changing power of his Spirit (Eph. 4:3–6). God’s fatherly discipline will yield in his children’s relationships a *peaceful* harvest of righteousness (Heb. 12:11). Included in the fruit the Spirit is producing in believers is peace (Gal. 5:22).

Along with peace, we must also pursue “the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Jesus pronounced blessing on the “pure in heart,” who “shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). The OT law revealed that *lack* of holiness prevents worshipers from drawing near to God, but through Christ’s blood we “have been sanctified” once for all in our standing before God, so we can draw near to him (Heb. 10:10, 14, 19–22). Yet the new covenant delivers not only forgiveness but also transformation of hearts (10:15–16). Tasting God’s grace in the cleansing of our stained consciences will whet Christians’ longing to reflect the beauty of his holiness in our character, affections, desires, and conduct (1 Thess. 4:3–7; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:13). Our Father’s loving purpose in disciplining us is “that we may share his holiness” (Heb. 12:10).

12:15 “See to it” reflects a Greek verb (*episkopeō*) that in other contexts refers to oversight of others (2 Chron. 34:12; 1 Pet. 5:2). The cognate noun “overseer” (*episkopos*) expresses church elders’ responsibility for the spiritual care and protection of their flock (Acts 20:28–31; 1 Tim. 3:2–7; Titus 1:5–9). Our author will mention this role in his discussion of the church’s leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17), but here, as in 3:13, the entire congregation is called to be vigilant. We must be on the lookout for three types of people whose sinful example and influence threaten the unity and purity of the Christian community. The repeated Greek formula *mē tis* (“lest any[one],” reflected in the ESV’s repeated “that no one”) identifies these three dangers: (1) one who falls short of God’s grace; (2) a “root of bitterness,” who defiles others; and (3) one who is immoral and profane, like Esau. The author has drawn from

Deuteronomy 29:18–21 LXX not only the “root of bitterness” expression but also the “lest anyone” (*mē tis*) formula: “Beware lest [*mē tis*] there be among you a man or woman . . . whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God. . . . Beware lest [*mē tis*] there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit.” These covenant breakers are not just weakened limbs needing healing (Heb. 12:12–13); they are malignancies endangering the body’s very survival.

The one who “fails to obtain” (*hystereō*) God’s grace is like those in Israel’s wilderness generation, who fell short (*hystereō*) of God’s rest through unbelief (4:1). All humanity has sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23). Some who have failed to obtain God’s grace are identified visibly with the people of God—OT Israel and the NT church—but their professed faith will not prove genuine. Since our preacher is adapting Deuteronomy 29:18, to fall short of God’s grace is nothing short of apostasy, “turning away . . . from the Lord our God.”

Moses used the image of a “root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit” to characterize the one who “blesses himself in his heart, saying, ‘I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart’” (Deut. 29:19), imagining that belonging to Israel’s covenant community would insulate him from judgment despite his defiance of the Lord’s demands. Our preacher warns that such smug rebellion can infect and “defile many” others. The OT laws of ceremonial purity defined conditions and contacts that would “defile,” rendering people unfit for worship (Leviticus 11; 13; 18; 21; 22; etc.). Physical defilement temporarily excluded worshipers from an earthly sanctuary, but spiritual defilement is eternally lethal.

12:16–17 The third threat is the individual who imitates Esau’s secular mind-set and immoral lifestyle. Esau exemplifies the opposite of the OT faithful witnesses. They trusted God’s word about things not yet seen, while Esau looked no further than his bodily appetites. He was “sexually immoral,” taking two Hittite wives, who grieved his covenant-revering parents (Gen. 26:34–35). His mind-set was “unholy” (*bebēlos*): “common” in contrast to holy, irreverent in contrast to God-fearing, secular in contrast to glimpsing eternal things (Lev. 10:10; Ezek. 22:26; 1 Tim. 1:9; 4:7; 6:20). Esau’s this-worldly frame of reference explains his readiness, as firstborn, to sell his right to a double inheritance in exchange for a single meal. Scripture comments, “Thus Esau despised his birthright” (Gen. 25:29–34). Disbelieving God’s promises, Esau prioritized the immediate gratification of his appetites over inheritance in a land in which his family only sojourned as aliens (Heb. 11:9, 13).

Later, Jacob (through deceit, unmentioned by our author) secured the firstborn’s blessing as well as the birthright Esau had so easily bartered away (Gen. 27:30–38). Esau’s outcry and weeping (Gen. 27:34, 38) could not reverse his rejection by God nor undo the blessing Isaac had already pronounced on Jacob. Esau sought “the blessing,” but he (lit.) “found no *place of repentance* [*metanoias . . . topon*].” Even though he desired the dominance his father had conferred on Jacob, Esau never experienced a deep change of heart. He became the archetype of a

person so hardened, despite covenantal privileges, that he could not be restored to repentance (Heb. 6:6).

Response

Christians' responsibility to protect the vulnerable and support the weak and wounded entails our calling to pursue peace and holiness together. We do not nervously attempt a superficial peace at any price, indifferent to God's truth or holiness. Nor do we magnify prohibitions beyond God's Word, defining holiness in negative terms ("Do not handle . . . taste . . . touch"; Col. 2:21) and thereby fragmenting the church's peace and crushing its walking wounded. As God disciplines us in fatherly love, so we must express his caring correction to each other, especially to those with drooping hands or feeble knees, our teammates who, though injured, are still in the race. Moreover, pursuing peace and holiness together demands that we all be vigilant to identify and resist those who would lure others toward apostasy, complacency in sin, and short-sighted fixation on immediate gratification. Running with endurance is a team sport.

HEBREWS 12:18–29

¹⁸ For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, ²³ and to the assembly¹ of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

¹ Or *church*

Section Overview: The Earthly Mount Sinai and the Heavenly Mount Zion

In the previous section, the place where believers enjoyed “rest” with God was the heavenly *homeland* symbolized by Canaan, the earthly Promised Land, though a promised *city* was also mentioned (Heb. 11:8–10, 13–16). Now our attention is focused on that *city and sanctuary*, in which we draw near to worship God. In contrast to the terrors of the earthly Mount Sinai, where God delivered the first covenant to Israel, we have come now by faith to Mount Zion in the heavenly Jerusalem, entering a worshiping assembly filled with joy and thanksgiving through the presence of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. Since God now addresses us from heaven, we must attend even more carefully to his word, both because spurning him brings judgment and because God bestows an eternal kingdom on those who worship through Jesus, in reverence and awe.

Section Outline

- I. You have not come to the terrifying Mount Sinai on earth, but to the celebrating Mount Zion in heaven (12:18–24)
 - A. The terrors of Mount Sinai in sight and sound struck Israel and Moses with trembling fear (12:18–21)
 - B. The celebrating sanctuary of Mount Zion is populated by angels, perfected saints and heirs, God the judge, and Jesus, whose blood secured our forgiveness (12:22–24)
- II. Heed God’s voice as he warns from heaven, and worship him with grateful faith (12:25–29)
 - A. As we hear God’s voice speaking from heaven, we must heed his warning (12:25)
 - B. God’s voice shook the earth at Sinai; but at history’s end his voice will “shake” the present heaven and earth, dismantling all but his unshakable kingdom (12:26–27)
 - C. We are receiving this unshakable kingdom, so let us offer thankful and reverent worship, pleasing to our God, the “consuming fire” (12:28–29)

Comment

12:18 The sermon moves to a new theme: the better mountain, city, and sanctuary that constitute the locale of worship under the new covenant. Yet the opening “For” shows that this discussion supports the preceding call to encourage those who are discouraged, to pursue peace and holiness, and to rebuff infecting influences that would lure us away from allegiance to Jesus. Our corporate care for each other is motivated by the privilege we now share as those who worship in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Our preacher graphically portrays the terrifying phenomena that accompanied the Lord’s descent to Mount Sinai to meet with Moses and deliver his covenant to Israel. His point, however, is that those who approach God through Jesus’

mediation “have *not* come” to such a daunting encounter with God. Rather, our worship centers on a mountain sanctuary far better than Sinai in both mood and transcendent reality. On the other hand, this section opens with “blazing fire” and closes with a reminder that Israel’s God is our God, a “consuming fire” (v. 29). He is gracious toward us through Jesus, but his holiness is still lethal to those who harbor their sin.

Sinai was both *touchable* and *terrifying*. The verb translated “may be touched” refers elsewhere to the tangibility of Jesus’ resurrection body (Luke 24:39; 1 John 1:1), which is vital to our eternal hope. But here Sinai’s physical “touchability” shows that it belongs to the present created order, which will pass away (Heb. 1:10–12). That touchable mountain was associated with the sanctuary made by human hands (9:11, 24) and with the animal sacrifices offered there, which could cleanse only the flesh, not the conscience (9:10, 13).

The display of God’s glory at Sinai was also *terrifying*, visibly and audibly. Reminding the Israelites of what they saw at that mountain, Moses mentioned blazing fire, darkness, gloom, and tempest (Deut. 4:11 LXX; cf. Ex. 19:16–18; 20:18). The mountain also “trembled greatly” (Ex. 19:18), but our author is reserving that detail for later (Heb. 12:25–27).

12:19–20 Audibly, Sinai stunned the people of Israel with the sound of a trumpet, which grew louder and louder (Ex. 19:16, 19), and the very voice of God (Heb. 12:19; Deut. 4:12). The Lord’s voice thundered so mightily that the Israelites pleaded for God not to address them directly but instead to convey his word through the mediation of Moses: “You [Moses] speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (Ex. 20:18–21). The glory of the Lord consecrated the entire mountain with his dangerous holiness. No human or animal was permitted to touch the mountain, and violators would be executed by stoning (Ex. 19:12).

12:21 The entire scene was so “terrifying,” so fear-instilling (*phoberon*), that Moses himself, with whom God spoke “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex. 33:11), trembled in fright. Looking back on Israel’s spiritual adultery with the golden calf as he received the law on the mountain peak, Moses said, “Then I lay prostrate before the LORD . . . forty days and forty nights. . . . For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the LORD bore against you” (Deut. 9:18–19).

12:22 “But you have come to” a mountain with more majesty and a mood of joy, not dread. Earlier in Hebrews, “you have come to” (*proserchomai*) described the priestly privilege of “drawing near” to God in worship and prayer (4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22). The first, fear-filled mountain has not been named, though Sinai’s identity is obvious from the allusions to Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4 and 9. Now, however, the mountain to which new covenant believers have come is named: “Mount Zion, . . . the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” The first two titles call to mind the stronghold David captured and made his capital (2 Sam. 5:6–10), which became the site of the temple built by Solomon. One psalmist sang,

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised
 in the city of our God!
 His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation,
 is the joy of all the earth,
 Mount Zion, in the far north,
 the city of the great King. (Ps. 48:1–2)

The third title, “*heavenly* Jerusalem,” however, casts a new light on the others. The location of Christians’ worship is not on a mountain that “may be touched” anywhere on earth—neither in the Sinai Peninsula nor in Judah/Judea. The apostle Paul identified Mount Sinai and the law delivered there with the “present Jerusalem,” the center of the Judaism of his day, which rejected Jesus’ gospel of grace. By contrast, believers in Jesus, whatever their racial background, can look to the “Jerusalem above” as their mother (Gal. 4:21–31). Likewise, one of John’s visions on Patmos identified the earthly Jerusalem with the “great city” that rejected God’s witnesses, in which “their Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8). Another vision portrayed the “holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 21:2).

Jews who came to believe in Jesus sometimes faced expulsion from the Jewish community (John 9:22, 34; 16:2; Acts 18:4–7; Rev. 2:9; 3:8–9). The original hearers of Hebrews may have been facing such exclusion (Heb. 13:12–13). But in Jesus they and we have access to the better sanctuary in the heavenly city of God. This city is the home for which the patriarchs hoped (11:10, 16) and the “lasting city” for which new covenant believers still long (13:14). Yet even now, as we gather in worship, we “have come” to it already.

Those assembled for worship in this heavenly sanctuary show the celebratory and reverent tone of the event. First are “innumerable angels in festal gathering [*panēgyris*].” In the LXX this term refers to Israel’s appointed feasts (Ezek. 46:11; Hos. 2:13; 9:5; Amos 5:21). The ESV correctly connects “festal gathering” with the myriads of angels rather than with the “assembly of the firstborn” (contra KJV, NASB). In this list, “and” marks off discrete groups, so *panēgyris* (followed by “and”) belongs to what precedes it. Angels are mentioned first since they appear early in the sermon (Heb. 1:4–2:18). God directed them to worship the Son when he entered the world to come at his ascension (cf. comment on 1:6), and they are sent by God to serve humans who are to inherit salvation through the Son (1:14; 2:5–10). They celebrate as observers of that salvation (1 Pet. 1:10–12; Rev. 5:11–12).

12:23 The human worshipers are introduced under two titles: “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” and “the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” That “the firstborn” is a plural noun is obvious in Greek (*prōtotokōn*) and visible in English, since they “*are* enrolled” and constitute an assembly. The term translated “assembly” (*ekklēsia*) typically refers to the “church” in the NT. In the LXX it is the term for the congregation of Israel assembled to worship in God’s presence (Deut. 9:10; 31:30; Pss. 26:12; 35:18; etc.). The plural form of “firstborn” seems surprising, since we have heard God direct angels to worship his (singular)

firstborn Son (Heb. 1:6), the unique “heir of all things” (1:2). Esau’s shortsighted sale of his birthright (*prōtotokia*) has just reminded us that only one son in a family may enjoy the unique privileges of the firstborn (12:16–17). Yet *many* firstborn children of God make up this heavenly “assembly.” This is because all whom the unique divine and messianic Son calls his “brothers” share by grace in the Son’s inheritance (2:12; Rom. 8:17). Their names are “enrolled in heaven,” inscribed for eternal life in God’s book. This image runs throughout the Bible (Ex. 32:32–33; Pss. 87:6; 139:16; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 20:12–15) and symbolizes God’s sovereign, specific, and irreversible electing love toward individuals.

From another perspective, the human worshipers in heaven are the “spirits of the righteous made perfect.” These are the OT people of faith on whose behalf God testified that they were righteous as they lived by faith (Heb. 10:37–38; 11:2, 39). That they are “spirits” indicates they have not yet participated in the final resurrection of the dead (Rev. 6:9–11; 20:4). Yet, in contrast to their condition prior to Christ’s coming (Heb. 11:40), now they have been “made perfect”—along with us—through the sacrifice of Jesus (10:14).

Between the two descriptions of this privileged (“firstborn”) and consecrated (“made perfect”) people stands the divine object of their adoration: “God, the judge of all.” Abraham appealed to God’s supreme authority as “Judge of all the earth” as he bargained for the survival of anyone living in Sodom who might have been righteous (Gen. 18:25). Jesus announced that his Father had delegated to him the role of judge, and various NT texts repeat this point (John 5:22–23, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Tim. 4:8; James 5:9). Here God the Father is in view. As the earlier citation of Deuteronomy 32:36 showed, the Lord’s authority to judge his people is a “fearful thing” to the guilty (Heb. 10:30–31). How, then, can our author assure us that the mountain we have approached does *not* hold Sinai’s terrors? The answer lies in the last two features of the heavenly festival, described in the following verse (cf. comment).

12:24 Finally our author brings into view “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,” and his “sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” Jesus has inaugurated this new and better covenant and secured its better promises: forgiveness of sins, transformation of hearts, and access to God (7:22; 8:6–12; 10:15–18). The “sprinkled blood” represents the infinitely costly sacrifice he offered to secure these blessings for those who approach God through him. As the law provided cleansing from ceremonial defilement through the blood of bulls and goats and through the sprinkling of water containing a heifer’s ashes, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (9:13–14). Our hearts have been “sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (10:22; cf. 1 Pet. 1:2).

The OT roster of faith opened with Abel’s acceptable sacrifice and death (Heb. 11:4), but the cause of his death—his brother’s violence—was not mentioned. Now we hear an echo of God’s accusation against Cain: “The voice of your brother’s

blood is crying to me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10). Its cry was for avenging justice, but Jesus’ blood intercedes for mercy and forgiveness. God the “judge of all,” who sent his Son into the world to accomplish his will, offering his body as a sacrifice for others’ sins (Heb. 10:5–10), is pleased to grant the petition of that precious blood on our behalf. Thus we may draw near with confidence and enter this heavenly assembly with joyful gratitude (12:28).

12:25 In view of our privilege to worship in the heavenly Jerusalem, our author issues two exhortations, one a warning (“See that you do not refuse him who is speaking”) and the other a positive admonition (“let us be thankful and worship”; cf. v. 28). The warning repeats the *a fortiori*, “how much more” (rabbinic *qal v’homer*, “light and heavy”) argument that appeared in different terms in 2:1–4 (cf. comment on 2:2–4): Since God’s word spoken through angels was so binding that its violation brought severe punishment, God’s word spoken by Jesus must receive even more allegiance.

In chapter 2 the contrast between the ancient law and the “last days” word of salvation focused on the respective dignities of God’s *messengers*, as the angels were contrasted to the Son. Now the contrast is between the *earthly* venue of God’s speech at Sinai and the *heavenly* source from which the Lord now addresses his new covenant people. Since the Son through whom God speaks “in these last days” (1:2) is enthroned above (8:1–2), he “warns from heaven.” Christ speaks in this inspired “word of exhortation” (13:22), since through this Scripture the Holy Spirit is testifying and God’s voice is heard “today” (3:7, 13, 15; 4:7; 10:15). The exalted Christ’s voice is also heard as he addresses his church through human leaders who teach God’s Word (13:7, 17). Such servants of the Word may seem less splendid than angels, but they are heirs of salvation whom angels are sent to serve (1:14), and through them Jesus Christ, who remains “the same yesterday and today and forever,” teaches and leads his people (13:8).

12:26–27 Our preacher draws one more contrast between God’s ancient speech at Sinai and his speech in times to come. At Sinai, God’s voice “shook the earth.” “The whole mountain trembled greatly” at the arrival of its Creator (Ex. 19:18; cf. Judg. 5:4–5; Ps. 68:7–8). That trauma to the earth foreshadowed a coming day when God would speak “once more” and his voice would “shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” The words of this promise come from Haggai 2:6 (also Hag. 2:21). Jews who had returned from the exile needed encouragement to rebuild God’s temple, so the Lord promised to shake “the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land.”

In its immediate context this promise meant that he would compel the nations to contribute their wealth to his sanctuary (Hag. 2:7–9). Yet Haggai’s imagery transcended its immediate application, as he was evoking imagery used previously by Isaiah to portray the coming day when the Lord’s vengeance would bring destruction not only to the earth’s inhabitants but also to the heaven and its starry host (Isa. 13:13; 34:1–5). Isaiah also prophesied that the present cosmos would be replaced by a new heavens and earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22). NT authors develop this

motif (2 Pet. 3:10–13; Rev. 21:1–4). Psalm 102:25–27, cited in Hebrews 1:10–12, predicted that the earth and heavens would wear out and perish, whereas the divine Son who created them remains eternally, unchangeably “the same” (cf. Heb. 13:8). Since the eschatological cosmic “shaking” will remove “things that have been made,” we might have thought that only the Creator himself would remain in its aftermath. Yet our preacher hastens to assure us that God has a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and this unshakable kingdom is his gift to those who believe.

12:28–29 The kingdom of God was the dominant theme of Jesus’ preaching, yet so far Hebrews has mentioned it just once (1:8–9, citing Ps. 45:6–7). Our attention has been so focused on Jesus’ priesthood that our preacher’s conclusion may now take us by surprise: God has a kingdom that is so unshakable that it will survive when all else dissolves. In King Nebuchadnezzar’s troubling dream, a great stone shattered a statue representing human empires. That stone symbolized a kingdom that the God of heaven would erect, one that “shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall . . . stand forever” (Dan. 2:44; cf. 7:13–14, 18). Even more surprisingly, God bestows this kingdom as a gift we are “receiving.” Believers in Jesus are the heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14) to whom God will subject the world to come (2:5); they are the “many sons” whom he is bringing to glory (2:10), whom the Son calls his brothers (2:11–12). Jesus assured his followers, weak though they were, that his Father was pleased to give them the kingdom (Matt. 25:34; Luke 12:32; 22:28–30).

Our response to so gracious a gift must be worship offered in gratitude, reverence, and awe (Heb. 12:28). God the judge of all, for the sake of Jesus the new covenant mediator, has welcomed believers to draw near and worship in his Most Holy Place. Thanksgiving for such privilege must motivate worship that God finds “acceptable,” or pleasing (*euarestōs*). What pleases God in worship is *faith*: “Whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:4–6; cf. 10:37–38; 13:15–16). Our grateful joy must be blended with reverence and awe because “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29; cf. Deut. 4:24). He is “our God,” committed to us in covenant, and for that reason he jealously demands our complete trust and allegiance.

Response

This section teaches us much about the worship our churches offer to God each Lord’s Day. It calls us to look through what is “touchable,” accessible to our five senses, and to stand amazed that—through faith—in our songs, prayers, sermons, and sacraments we are participants in the liturgy of heaven itself, joining our hearts with those of countless angels and the cloud of witnesses who have run faith’s race before us. This text assures us that Jesus’ sprinkled blood has silenced Sinai’s terrors and ushered us into his Father’s favor. Because the ascended Christ addresses us from heaven as his Word is read and preached, our ears must be attuned to his voice and our hearts responsive to his warning, correction, and

exhortation. Our secret motives and spoken words must blend gratitude (which keeps seriousness from drifting into dry duty) with reverent awe (which keeps joy from degenerating into flippancy).

OVERVIEW OF HEBREWS 13:1–25

The genre of Hebrews now shifts from homiletical to epistolary. Up to this point the “word of exhortation” (13:22) has been structured as a sermon expounding a series of OT passages in order to show Jesus as superior to the offices and institutions of the old covenant. The biblical expositions have led to exhortations that show hearers how they should respond to God’s grace in Christ. Now Hebrews concludes with features typical of Hellenistic epistles: brief ethical directives, instructions about relationships, a request for prayer, benedictions, travel plans, and personal greetings. These epistolary components, though conventional, are not merely perfunctory. Rather, the preacher incorporates major themes from the sermon material of chapters 1–12. Specifically, Hebrews 13:9–16 revisits and applies the contrast between OT worship and Jesus’ priestly ministry (8:1–10:35), the reproach of Christ (10:32–33; 11:13, 35–38), the heavenly city (11:10, 16; 12:22–24), and “acceptable worship” (12:28).

HEBREWS 13:1–8

13 Let brotherly love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. ⁵Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” ⁶So we can confidently say,

“The Lord is my helper;
I will not fear;
what can man do to me?”

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Section Overview: Love, Purity, and Trust in Jesus Christ's Constant Presence

The epistolary closing begins with a series of terse ethical directives. These commands address three spheres: relationships with other believers, especially sufferers (Heb. 13:1–3); the meeting of physical needs (sexual and financial) in submission to and trust in God (vv. 4–6); and leadership transitions in the congregation (vv. 7–8). The brevity of the commands is more evident in Greek (many are only three or four words) than in English: “Let brotherly love continue” translates a Greek noun (with article) and a verb; “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers” reflects a noun (with article), a negative particle, and a verb; and “Let marriage be held in honor” reflects an adjective and noun (with article). Most of these commands are supported by rationales for obeying. For example, hospitality should be extended to strangers because “thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (v. 2); marriage should be honored because God will punish adulterers (v. 4); we should not crave money because God will never forsake us (vv. 5–6).

Section Outline

- I. Show love to brothers and sisters, hospitality to strangers, and compassion to prisoners (13:1–3)
 - A. Let brother-love continue (13:1)
 - B. Do not neglect stranger-love (13:2)
 - C. Remember those imprisoned and publicly abused (13:3)
- II. Seek satisfaction of physical needs in submission to God the ever-present judge and helper (13:4–6)
 - A. Honor marriage and shun immorality (13:4)
 - B. Find security not in money but in God's promised presence (13:5–6)
- III. Learn from the example of your past leaders, but rest in the unchanging Christ (13:7–8)
 - A. Remember and imitate human leaders' faith (13:7)
 - B. But rest your hope in Jesus Christ, who is ever “the same” (13:8)

Comment

13:1–3 The first three imperatives summon hearers to costly care for fellow Christians, particularly those in special need: strangers who need lodging, and believers enduring chains or mistreatment for Christ. The first command insists that the practice of brotherly love (*philadelphia*) must “continue” across the whole congregation (cf. Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2 Pet. 1:7). In the past, the hearers have shown love for God's name by serving the saints (Heb. 6:9–10;

cf. 10:32–34). Now they must not let increasing persecution discourage them from continuing to care for one another. Their family solidarity is grounded in their identity as sons of God and brothers and sisters of Christ (2:10–12, 17; 12:5–11), and thus as each other's brothers and sisters as well (3:1, 12; 10:19; 13:22).

The general command (13:1) is linked to the second (v. 2) by vocabulary and syntax visible in the Greek original. In both, nouns containing the stem *phil-* (“love”) open the clause and are followed by verbs:

Brother-love (*philadelphia*) let continue

Stranger-love (*philoxenia*) do not neglect

The second command is then linked to the third (v. 3) through synonymous verbs: “do not neglect” (or lit., “do not forget”) states negatively what “remember” (*mimnēskethe*) states positively. Hearers must not merely mentally recall but also tangibly practice hospitality to strangers. Brotherly love must especially continue to brothers and sisters in need: strangers, prisoners, and victims of public mistreatment. These groups must be the recipients of concrete acts of brotherly love because of their obvious lack (of shelter or of human contact or consolation).

In a situation of looming persecution, the publicly reviled are those from whom others might be tempted to withdraw. The first audience of Hebrews knew from experience what it meant to have one's property plundered (10:34), so they might empathize with the OT faithful who went homeless, seeking shelter in caves (11:38). But with opposition on the rise, to open one's home to strangers posed a risk. Even if they bore letters of introduction, such as that which Demetrius carried to Gaius (3 John 1–3, 12), such letters could be forged (2 Thess. 2:2; 3:17). So some might fear that, by welcoming strangers, they would take in *spies or informants* “unawares.” When Saul the persecutor returned from Damascus, claiming to have become a disciple, many in the church at Jerusalem understandably viewed him with suspicion (Acts 9:26).

Our author counterbalances that fear with another possibility: some believers who extended hospitality to strangers subsequently discovered they had been entertaining the Lord's angels without recognizing who they were (Gen. 18:1–8; 19:1–3). Jesus said that those who extended hospitality to his homeless brothers or visited even the least of his imprisoned siblings were, unbeknownst to them, caring for the King himself (Matt. 25:34–40).

The command to “remember” not only prisoners as though chained alongside them but also those publicly abused for Jesus' sake is an encouragement to continue what the hearers had done during an earlier wave of persecution (Heb. 10:32–34). After all, “you also are in the body,” equally vulnerable to captivity and mistreatment. By going to and being with such victims, despite the stigma, the hearers bear the reproach of Christ (11:24–26) and encourage their suffering siblings. In chains and nearing martyrdom, Paul was similarly refreshed by Onesiphorus, who sought him out and “was not ashamed of my chains” (2 Tim. 1:16–18).

13:4–6 The next two directives—to honor marriage (v. 4) and eschew the love of money (vv. 5–6)—are linked by parallels in Greek syntax. In each command a predicate adjective opens the clause, followed by the subject (with its article), with the connecting verb (a form of “to be”) unstated but implied (see the three-part table 1.7).

TABLE 1.7: Greek Syntactical Parallels Linking Hebrews 13:4 and 13:5–6

	Predicate Adjective	Implied Verb	Subject
13:4	valuable/precious (<i>timios</i>)	[let-it-be]	the marriage (<i>ho gamos</i>)
13:5–6	not silver-loving (<i>aphilargyros</i>)	[let-it-be]	the lifestyle (<i>ho tropos</i>)

In each directive the first clause is amplified by a second that restates the first in other words:

13:4	valuable/precious and the bed	[let-it-be] [let-it-be]	the marriage undefiled
13:5–6	not silver-loving being content	[let-it-be]	the lifestyle [with] the possessions

Finally, each directive is supported by a rationale introduced by “for” (*gar*):

13:4	for (<i>gar</i>) immoral and adulterous people God will judge.
13:5–6	for (<i>gar</i>) he has said, “Never you will I leave, nor you will I forsake.”

These directives summon Christians to seek satisfaction of their physical needs and desires through submitting to God’s will and trusting in God’s presence. Sex and money are perennial human issues, and with both the author orients our hearts toward God, who designed our sexual drives to be fulfilled in marriage and who jealously woos our anxious hearts away from an adulterous affair with silver. In doing so, God makes good his promise never to leave us (a promise that silver cannot keep: Prov. 23:4–5; Luke 12:16–21).

“Held in honor” reflects the adjective *timios* (Acts 5:34), which can often mean “precious” in the sense of having great value, such as “precious stones” (1 Kings 10:2, 10–11; 1 Cor. 3:12). Our author focuses on the priceless gem of sexual intimacy, to be protected by the covenant of exclusive fidelity between a man and a woman. That sexual purity within marriage is his concern is shown in the amplification “Let the marriage bed be undefiled [*amiantos*]” and in the rationale he offers: “God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.” Because God designed human marriage and its sexual intimacy to illustrate his exclusive covenant love for his people, he will jealously defend its precious purity (Ezekiel 16; Eph. 5:22–33). Sexual union (lit., “the bed”) within the covenant of marriage is “undefiled.” Jesus likewise is intrinsically “unstained” (*amiantos*; Heb. 7:26), and he has cleansed our consciences.

Having experienced such cleansing at such great cost to our High Priest, we must not cheapen the treasures of sexuality and marriage that he counts so precious. Our author has warned against the bitter root that could “defile” many and against the influence of the “sexually immoral” person like Esau (12:15–16).

Esau’s preference of one meal over God’s promised inheritance also exemplifies the person whose life is characterized by “love of money.” An insatiable appetite to acquire possessions is a form of idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), since it relies on created things to provide the satisfaction and security found only in the Creator (Rom. 1:25; cf. Jer. 2:11–13). The Lord Jesus warned against covetousness: “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15). Christian contentment (Phil. 4:11–13; 1 Tim. 6:6–10) springs from confidence that our divine provider and protector will keep his promise to “never leave you nor forsake you.” In this statement our preacher blends the wording of God’s promises to Jacob (Gen. 28:15) and Joshua (Josh. 1:5; cf. Deut. 31:6–8), as each faced a daunting and uncertain future.

Since God kept his word to Jacob, Joshua, and a great cloud of OT witnesses, we too can echo the bold announcement the author quotes from Psalm 118:6 (LXX 117:6): “The Lord is my helper [*boēthos*]; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” The ancient psalmist, surrounded by enemies, confidently defeated them “in the name of the LORD” (Ps. 118:10–13). Hebrews has shown the length to which the Lord went to be our “helper,” undergoing suffering and temptation in order to “help” (*boētheō*) us in temptation (2:14–18) and to grant us access to the throne of grace, where we find “grace to help [*boētheia*] in time of need” (4:16).

13:7–8 The Lord will never leave his people, but the same cannot be said of human leaders. Like Levitical priests, they are “prevented by death from continuing in office” (7:23). Therefore, in addition to “remembering” those presently suffering imprisonment and abuse (13:3), the hearers must also “remember” their congregation’s original leaders, who no longer serve among them. In the past they “spoke to you the word of God,” and hearers must now recollect the “outcome of their way of life.” That “outcome” (*ekbasis*) was their exit from life on this earth, the completion of their pilgrimage. Whether their deaths were due to natural or accidental causes or to martyrdom, our author does not say. Although the hearers of Hebrews themselves had not yet shed blood (12:4), some of their leaders may have done so. Elsewhere in the NT, congregational leaders are called “elders” or “overseers” (Acts 20:17–35; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet. 5:1–3). Teaching and spiritual shepherding are the ministries of such elders/overseers. The original leaders of the people reading this letter “spoke . . . the word of God,” and their successors were “keeping watch over your souls” (Heb. 13:7, 17). The first generation’s integrity and conduct were no doubt exemplary, but our author spotlights their *faith* as that which must be imitated (reinforcing the point of 10:26–12:3).

The later admonition to “obey your leaders and submit to them” (13:17) may imply that some in the congregation have not transitioned well from the first

generation to the present leadership. If any were troubled over the loss of those who once shepherded them, they must realize that their great shepherd is and always will be with them: “Jesus Christ is the same [*ho autos*] yesterday and today and forever.” The OT citations showing the Son’s divine superiority to angels at the start of this sermon included Psalm 102:25–27, in which the Son is contrasted with the created heavens and earth: “They will perish, but you remain. . . . You are the same [*ho autos*], and your years will have no end” (Heb. 1:10–12).

The created order’s mutability has touched his hearers’ experience in the death of their shepherds, but the divine Son, Jesus Christ, remains “the same,” unchangeable and eternal. That divine Son has become the incarnate Son, has undergone temptation and suffering and death, and has emerged triumphant “by the power of an indestructible life” (7:16) to become and remain a “priest *forever*, after the order of Melchizedek” (7:17). If the death of trusted human shepherds has contributed to the hearers’ weariness and faintheartedness, they must realize that they have a “great shepherd” whom God “brought again from the dead” (13:20). He “always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25) and keeps his word, promising, “I will never leave you nor forsake you,” which he expressed in other words to his awestruck disciples after his resurrection: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

Response

Christian faith has doctrinal content, but it is much more than intellectual agreement with propositions. To live by faith is to allow God’s Word about “things not seen” to control our perception of situations, our desires and affections and priorities, and our actions and relationships. The ethical directives concluding this sermon-letter of Hebrews illustrate this. Faith opens our eyes to see homeless strangers bearing Jesus’ name not as threats or inconveniences but as opportunities to serve our Lord or his angels; thus faith opens our hearts and homes. Faith shows us the priceless treasure of the marriage covenant as God defines and jealously defends it. Faith enables us to “see through” silver’s fleeting glitter, calming our frenetic quest for security in anything other than the helper who will never leave us.

In the lives and words of frail human leaders, faith catches glimpses and hears echoes of Jesus Christ, the ever-living, never-leaving great shepherd of the sheep. In everyday relationships, decisions, stresses, and trials, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). How is this possible? As Paul summarizes, “We look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18).

HEBREWS 13:9–16

⁹Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. ¹⁰We have an altar from which those who serve the tent¹ have no right to eat. ¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. ¹²So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. ¹³Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. ¹⁴For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. ¹⁵Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

¹Or *tabernacle*

Section Overview: Priestly Privilege for Those Who Share Christ's Reproach

By reminding the hearers of their past leaders who taught them God's Word (13:7), our preacher has set the context for a sharp warning against succumbing to "diverse and strange teachings" that depart from the apostolic norm. This warning draws together themes already addressed in the sermon, such as the superiority of Jesus' blood to the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement, the contempt Jesus endured and believers must share, the abiding heavenly city, and worship pleasing to God. Striking turns of phrase alert hearers to the radical reversals of expectations that Christ's ministry has produced: Teachings that would lure Hebrew Christians back to the OT sanctuary and sacrifices are now "strange," since they contradict God's preparatory purposes for those institutions. Jesus' suffering "outside the camp," where things rendered unclean by sin were destroyed, has now cleansed his people. To share his reproach "outside" is to gain access to the benefits of a better altar and lasting city. The region of rejection has become the realm where, through Jesus, we offer sacrifices pleasing to God.

Section Outline

- I. Do not be drawn away from the true means of grace (13:9–10)
 - A. The OT tent and its foods cannot strengthen your hearts (13:9)
 - B. We have access to heart-establishing grace through Jesus' sacrifice (13:10)

- II. Jesus cleansed us by dying as one excluded and unclean, so we must share his reproach (13:11–14)
 - A. As Day of Atonement sacrifices, defiled by Israel's sins, were burned outside the camp, so Jesus died outside the gate to remove our defilement (13:11–12)
 - B. Let us share Jesus' rejection outside the camp, since we seek a lasting city to come (13:13–14)
- III. Through Jesus let us offer worship pleasing to God (13:15–16)
 - A. Let us offer a sacrifice of praise with our lips (13:15)
 - B. Let us offer sacrifices of generous compassion in our actions (13:16)

Comment

13:9–10 The church is always at risk of being “led away” (or “washed away,” as in a river current; cf. Eph. 4:14) by “diverse and strange teachings.” During the apostolic age, some denied Christ's incarnation (1 John 4:1–3), while others emphasized ascetic self-denial and mystical visions (Col. 2:8, 16–23). For the Jewish Christians who first received this sermon-letter, such strange teachings concerned “foods” (*brōmasin*) associated with the earthly sanctuary (“tent”) and its altar. Some commentators believe that the “foods” in question are those defined as “clean” by the OT kosher dietary laws (Leviticus 11), while others cite sources that link all meals consumed in observant Jewish homes with rites at the sanctuary.

Both of these associations are possible, but the preacher's argument in verses 10–12 directs our attention specifically to the sacrificial rituals performed at the sanctuary itself. “Foods” have been linked to “gifts and sacrifices” offered in the first tent that “cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper” (Heb. 9:9–10). Now our author repeats that they “have not benefited those devoted to them.” He seems to have in mind the peace offerings that symbolized communion between the Lord and his people, since the meat of the sacrificed animal was shared by the Lord (blood sprinkled, fat and entrails burned), the priests, and the Israelite worshipers themselves (Lev. 3:1–17; 7:11–16). Such a fellowship meal in the OT sanctuary was rich in symbolism, but, since it conformed to “regulations for the body” (Heb. 9:10) that were temporary and external, it is no longer appropriate for new covenant believers.

The original hearers, Jewish Christians long immersed in the practices of the OT sanctuary, may have been shocked to hear those familiar rites called “diverse and strange.” Our preacher calls them “strange” because they treat regulations that God ordained only “until the time of reformation” (9:10) as though they were intended to continue into “the last days.” Now that Christ has inaugurated the new covenant and has rendered the first covenant “obsolete” (8:13), to return to old covenant institutions is to contradict God's agenda for redemptive history. Our author used similar shocking language when he implied that losing faith in Jesus and returning to the comforting familiarity of Judaism would be nothing less than “[falling] away from the living God” (3:12).

What *does* now “strengthen” (or “establish”: *bebaioō*; cf. 2:3; 6:19) the heart is God’s grace, received through faith in Jesus. By God’s grace Jesus tasted death on behalf of every believer (2:9), so that through him we can draw near to God’s throne of grace to find grace (4:16). We can anticipate receiving God’s grace through Jesus because “we have an altar” to nourish us that is forbidden to the Levitical priests who serve “the tent,” the earthly sanctuary (cf. 8:4–5). Our “altar” symbolizes Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross “outside the gate” of Jerusalem (13:12). To “eat” from this altar is to benefit from his sacrifice offered once for all “to sanctify the people.” We do this not physically but by “[drawing] near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,” since Jesus’ blood has sprinkled our hearts clean from an evil conscience (10:22).

Those who do not trust in Christ’s atoning sacrifice, whether priests or lay folk, have no right to eat from this altar, no permission to draw spiritual benefit from his death. If the original hearers were to maintain their affiliation with Jesus and his people, they would risk reproach and exclusion from the Jewish community in which they were once welcome (13:13). But that loss is more than counterbalanced by the benefits flowing from Jesus’ shed blood on the cross: atonement, forgiveness, cleansing, confident access, and fellowship with the living God.

13:11–12 The imagery shifts from the perennial peace offerings to the annual Day of Atonement sacrifices, when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place, carrying blood to atone first for his own sins and then for the sins of the people (9:7, 25). This annual rite has been contrasted with the self-sacrifice of Christ, who brought his own blood into the heavenly sanctuary, atoning for sins once for all (9:24–28; 10:10–14). Now our attention is directed to what happened to the carcasses of the animals after their blood was brought into God’s presence. Whereas the meat of peace offerings could be consumed by priests and worshipers after the Lord’s best portions were consumed on the altar, on the Day of Atonement the whole bull and goat from which atoning blood had been taken were carried outside Israel’s camp and completely incinerated. They were destroyed “outside the camp,” the realm of what was unclean, unfit to be seen by the Lord, who “walks in the midst of your camp” (Deut. 23:14; cf. also Lev. 13:45–46; Num. 5:1–4). Flagrant violators of God’s covenant were also taken outside the camp, to be executed (Lev. 24:10–23; Num. 15:32–36).

The association of territory “outside the camp” with defilement and banishment from God’s holy presence explains the theological significance of the fact that Jesus was crucified “outside the gate” of Jerusalem (cf. John 19:16–17). He endured God’s wrath as he bore others’ sin in his body on the tree (Matt. 27:46; Rom. 3:24–25; 1 Pet. 2:24). By bearing their guilt and absorbing its penalty, this “holy, innocent, unstained” High Priest (Heb. 7:26) endured sin’s curse (2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13) and thereby “sanctified” his people by his blood. Throughout this sermon, “sanctify” (*hagiazō*; Heb. 2:11; 10:10, 14), “cleanse” (*katharizō*; 9:14, 23), and “perfect” (*teleioō*; 7:19; 9:9; 10:1, 14) have designated the purging from defilement that qualifies worshipers to approach God’s holy presence. Jesus’ sacrifice sanctifies

his people so that they may respond to divine grace with thankful and reverent worship (12:28), standing in God's presence as priests and offering sacrifices pleasing to him (13:15–16).

13:13–14 Jesus' crucifixion outside Jerusalem represented not only his forsakenness by God but also his repudiation by the Jewish community, "his own" people (Mark 15:9–15, 29–32; John 1:11; Acts 3:13–15). He prepared his disciples to endure the same rejection he had endured (Luke 6:22; John 16:2), and indeed they were rejected (John 9:22, 33; 12:42; Acts 18:5–7). To follow Jesus is to carry one's cross toward shameful death (Mark 8:34; Heb. 12:2). Now the recipients of this letter must be prepared to share the reproach that Jesus endured, just as Moses did long ago (Heb. 11:24–26). To join Jesus "outside the camp" may demand that one forgo access to the Jerusalem temple, acceptance in local synagogues, and acknowledgment by one's own family (Matt. 10:35–38).

Yet one OT passage foreshadows the *privilege* now enjoyed by those who go "outside the camp" for Jesus' sake. After Israel's adultery with the golden calf, the Israelites' defilement was so pervasive that Moses had to pitch the tent of meeting "outside the camp" (Ex. 33:7–11). That became the place where people went to meet with God. Because of institutional Judaism's repudiation of the Messiah, the spheres of the holy community and the polluted wasteland have been reversed. Those unwelcome in earthly Jerusalem's temple and expelled from synagogues have become heirs of God's unshakable kingdom and citizens of "the city that is to come." Admittedly, "*here* we [followers of Jesus] have no lasting city." But within a few years, in AD 70, Roman troops would destroy Jerusalem and its temple on Mount Zion. That city, which the psalmists had extolled for its security (Psalms 48; 87), would lie in ruins. When compared to the promise of being welcomed into the coming city that *abides* forever, to be expelled from a community that has turned its back on God's grace in Christ is no great loss.

13:15–16 As the promise of an unshakable kingdom led to a call to worship acceptably (12:28), so the prospect of life in God's everlasting city calls us to offer sacrifices that please him. Jesus offered himself as the final, complete sacrifice to atone for sins, so no further sin offering is needed (10:14, 18, 26). But believers cleansed by his death now enjoy the priestly privilege of bringing offerings that express their thanksgiving and consecration. The original "sacrifice of praise" was a slain animal (Lev. 7:12–15), but even in the OT the term underwent redefinition in the direction of oral expressions of adoration toward God. Our author alludes to Psalm 50, which states that the Lord seeks loyal hearts, not slain animals (Ps. 50:7–13) and commands us to, "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and perform your vows to the Most High. . . . The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me" (Ps. 50:14, 23).

To make clear that new covenant worship involves no animal bloodshed for any purpose, the author clarifies: "that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name." "Fruit of lips" is another OT echo, this one from Hosea 14:2 LXX, where

the phrase refers to words expressing repentant contrition. Our author adapts the wording to express a confession of allegiance to God. The term represented by “acknowledge” (*homologeō*) is a cognate of “confession” (*homologia*). Our author has identified Jesus as the “apostle and high priest of our confession” (Heb. 3:1) and has called us to hold fast our confession (4:14; 10:23). God is pleased by his people’s worship when they keep confessing their faith together.

The epistolary conclusion opened with an exhortation not to “neglect” (“forget,” *epilanthanomai*) hospitality for strangers (13:2). Now the verb reappears in order to urge hearers not to forget doing good or sharing financially. Their earlier service to the saints (6:10) and compassion for the persecuted (10:33–34) must continue in the present, not merely in hospitality and care for prisoners and other sufferers (13:1–3) but in all types of good deeds and generosity. “Share what you have” captures the financial connotation the term *koinōnia* (sometimes rendered “fellowship”) often has in the NT (Acts 2:42–45; Rom. 12:13; 15:26; 2 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 6:6; Phil. 4:15). Such “horizontal,” human-to-human forms of service have a “vertical” dimension as well, for God counts them as sacrifices offered to him and pleasing to him. Paul compares a church’s contribution toward his own financial support to an offering with a fragrant aroma, a “sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God” (Phil. 4:18). Our author expands the horizon further, showing that deeds of kindness and sharing offered to any of God’s people are offerings in which God himself delights.

Response

In the twenty-first century, no less than in the first, the church is exposed to “diverse and strange teachings” that threaten to loosen our moorings and set us adrift, sweeping us away from the word of God taught by the Lord and those who first heard him (Heb. 2:1–4). Sometimes, as they did for the first hearers of Hebrews, such rip currents take the form of a siren song, luring us to return to some earlier epoch in God’s redemptive agenda. Sometimes those who propose “improvements” to the apostolic gospel present themselves as progressives helping the church to keep in step with an ever-moving cultural context. Alternatives to living by faith in Jesus’ sacrifice and looking forward to his return may offer the comfort of familiarity or the reassurance of tangible rituals. But in whichever direction the ideological currents around us flow, however fierce the surrounding opposition, we must savor the priestly privilege Jesus won for us at the cost of his own lifeblood, hold fast our confession, and through him offer sacrifices of praise to God—while also caring for others.

HEBREWS 13:17–25

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

¹⁸ Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. ¹⁹ I urge you the more earnestly to do this in order that I may be restored to you the sooner.

²⁰ Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, ²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us¹ that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

²² I appeal to you, brothers,² bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly. ²³ You should know that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon. ²⁴ Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings. ²⁵ Grace be with all of you.

¹ Some manuscripts *you* ² Or *brothers and sisters*

Section Overview: Respect for Leaders and Blessings from God

Like other NT letters, Hebrews closes with directions, personal news, and a benediction. These concluding materials alternate between directions and news concerning believers' interpersonal relationships (13:17–19, 22–24) and benedictions from God (vv. 20–21, 25). The hearers must grant a new generation of leaders a respectful, responsive hearing, since they protect God's flock and must answer for its well-being. The author asks prayer for himself, that the Lord would restore him soon to the hearers' company. He urges his hearers to bear with his "word of exhortation," since this sermon has been brief. A first, fuller benediction combines themes developed previously, such as Jesus' covenant-inaugurating blood and the hearers' priestly privilege to offer service pleasing to God. A final, briefer benediction invokes God's grace on all of its hearers.

Section Outline

- I. Respect your leaders (13:17–19)
 - A. Heed the shepherds who watch over your souls (13:17)
 - B. Pray for me, especially for my return to you (13:18–19)
- II. Benediction: may God enable you to do what pleases him through Jesus (13:20–21)

- III. Respect your leaders (13:22–24)
 - A. Bear with my word of exhortation (13:22)
 - B. Expect my return, perhaps along with Timothy (13:23)
 - C. Greet your leaders and one another, receiving others' greetings (13:24)
- IV. Benediction: may God grant you grace (13:25)

Comment

13:17 The hearers must not only remember their first generation of leaders (13:7); they must also listen to their present leaders, with teachable minds and submissive hearts. Our author offers reasons to persuade his readers to cooperate with these leaders, so perhaps his audience was reluctant to accept the second generation's authority. Maybe the new leaders were being compared unfavorably to their predecessors or to interlopers who had introduced "diverse and strange teachings." We know that Judaizers followed in Paul's footsteps, luring Gentile believers toward Judaism's regulations and rituals (Gal. 1:6–9; 4:12–20; 5:7–12; 6:12–13). Likewise, "super-apostles" inclined Christians in Corinth to despise Paul's ministry (2 Cor. 10:7–12; 11:1–12:13). Perhaps these Hebrew Christians were being swayed by winsome teachers who contradicted the apostolic foundation laid by earlier leaders. "Obey [*peithō*] your leaders" enjoins not mindless submission but *persuasion* by the leaders' biblical instruction—elsewhere this verb introduces conclusions of which the author is convinced on the basis of evidence (Heb. 6:9; 13:18; cf. Acts 17:4; 18:4; 19:8). When persuaded by sound doctrine, the hearers must "submit" (*hypeikō*).

They submit because of their leaders' protective purpose and accountability to God. OT imagery forms the background of "they are keeping watch" and "will have to give an account." "Keeping watch" refers to wakeful vigilance at night, when enemies might attack under cover of darkness (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Eph. 6:18). This was the duty of watchmen on city walls (Ezek. 33:6) and shepherds tending flocks in open country (Ezek. 34:8). Watchmen who fail to sound the alarm when enemies approach and shepherds who do not protect the flock from predators will answer to God for their negligence. All will give account to God (Rom. 14:12; Heb. 4:13; 10:30–31; 12:29; 1 Pet. 4:5).

Leaders are answerable not only for themselves but also for those they influence (Acts 20:26–31; James 3:1). Elders who shepherd others with humility and integrity can anticipate a reward from the chief shepherd (1 Pet. 5:1–4). When God settles accounts, not only the *leaders'* conduct but also the response of *those they lead* will spell the difference between "joy" and "groaning." A godly self-interest should move hearers to hear and heed their leaders, because they provide spiritual protection, and it "would be of no advantage to you" if, on the day of reckoning, leaders must report that the hearers' have resisted God's word.

13:18–19 Our author asks his hearers to pray for him, as Paul often does as well (Rom. 15:30–32; Eph. 6:19–20; Col. 4:3–4; 1 Thess. 5:25; cf. Phil. 1:19). His request

honors his hearers, implying that they have the priestly privilege of access to God's throne of grace (Heb. 4:14–16). However, as Levitical priests interceded for other Israelites and as Jesus now intercedes for them (7:25), when the hearers “enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus” (10:19–20) they must not only present their own requests but must also intercede for others.

Our author confidently appeals for prayer because his self-examination has persuaded him that he has a “clear [*kalos*] conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things” (cf. Rom. 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:12). Previously the “cleansing” (*katharizō*) of our consciences by the blood of Christ referred to the *objective* result of forgiveness, which immediately removes defilement and disqualification to approach God's presence. Now, however, a (lit.) “good [*kalos*] conscience” reflects the *subjective* transformation God's grace produces in believers' motivations and desires over time.

The preacher mentions one specific request: that his friends ask God to hasten his return to them in person (cf. Rom. 15:30–32). His desire to be “restored” to them implies that he had previously ministered among them. This explains his detailed knowledge of their previous experience (Heb. 6:9–10; 10:32–34). Like other NT authors, he prefers ministry offered in person to written correspondence (Gal. 4:18–20; 3 John 13–14). He has urged them to encourage each other daily as they meet together (Heb. 3:13; 10:24–25), and he is eager to join them in that interaction. In the second cycle of closing news he will indicate that Timothy may accompany him “if he comes soon” (13:23), reemphasizing his sense of urgency to return to them “soon.”

13:20–21 As the author requested prayers for himself, so in return he invoked God's blessing on his hearers. Although sometimes categorized as “wish-prayers,” this rich benediction and the briefer one in verse 25 are not merely the record of the author's petition to God for his readers (as are, e.g., Eph. 1:15–23; Phil. 1:3–11). Benedictions have more weight than a petitioner's supplication. They *confer* benefit through a minister authorized to speak from and for God. Benedictions in NT letters extend the OT tradition of priestly blessing on Israel with the threefold pronouncement of the Lord's name to convey blessing, protection, favor, grace, and peace. “So shall [the priests] *put my name upon* the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:22–27).

The “God of peace” bestows blessing. “Peace” appeared previously in Hebrews in the interpretation of Melchizedek's title of “king of Salem” (7:2), in Rahab's kind treatment of Israelite spies (11:31), and in the command to “strive for peace with everyone” (12:14). Paul also describes God as the “God [or Lord] of peace” (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9), specifically in benedictions (Rom. 15:33; 1 Thess. 5:23; 2 Thess. 3:16). Perhaps the frequency of this expression is attributable to the influence of the Aaronic blessing, which closes, “The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Num. 6:26).

Hebrews has built its case for Jesus' perpetual tenure as High Priest, in part, on the “power of [his] indestructible life” (Heb. 7:16), so that “he always lives to make intercession” for believers (7:25). Now, at last, our author explicitly announces

Jesus' resurrection, when God "brought [him] again from the dead." As he has previously, our author builds anticipation by reserving the Savior's name for the end of the clause (in Greek word order): "who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, *our Lord Jesus*" (cf. 2:9; 3:1; 4:14; 7:22; 12:2, 24). Thus the name of Jesus concludes the description of the divine subject who blesses (13:20), and reappears to conclude the blessing he confers (13:21).

"Brought again" (or "led up," *anagō*) is an unusual verb for resurrection (cf. Rom. 10:7), reflecting the influence of Isaiah 63:11, which reads in the LXX, "who brought up [*anabibazō*] from the earth the shepherd of the sheep." In the exodus, the shepherd was Moses (cf. Ps. 77:20) and the rescue was from the sea; now the great shepherd, Jesus, has been "led up" from the realm of the dead. Jesus identified himself as the shepherd who would lay down his life to protect his sheep (John 10:1–18; cf. Ezek. 34:1–24; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4). Hebrews fittingly identifies his "blood of the eternal covenant" as the grounds of his resurrection. Moses sprinkled the "blood of the covenant" on the Israelites at Sinai (Heb. 9:20, citing Ex. 24:8), but they broke that covenant, and Jeremiah 31:31–34 pronounced it "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13). The new covenant, which Jesus' blood inaugurates, secures our everlasting salvation, fulfilling God's promises to establish an "eternal covenant" with his people (2 Sam. 23:5; Isa. 55:3; 61:8; Jer. 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:59–60; 37:26).

The blessing is that God would "equip you with everything good," enabling them to "do his will," which is "pleasing in his sight" (cf. Rom. 12:2). God had provided grace "through Jesus Christ," so the hearers had already been pursuing the "will of God" (Heb. 10:32–36). To continue such "pleasing" worship (*euareston*; 12:28; 13:16), they needed God to "equip" them (Eph. 4:12; 2 Tim. 3:17), to be "working in" believers what he finds pleasing (Phil. 2:12–13). Jesus is the mediator through whom God's mercy flows to us and through whom our grateful worship returns to God (Heb. 13:15). The doxology that concludes this benediction, "to whom be glory forever and ever," refers to the "God of peace." God's grace at work in believers brings him glory (Rom. 11:36; 16:27; Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20; Jude 25; Rev. 1:6).

13:22–23 The author now revisits the themes of his hearers' interpersonal relationships. He "appeals," or "exhorts" (*parakaleō*), them to bear with his "word of exhortation [*paraklēsis*]." As noted in the Introduction, this expression designates what we call a sermon: a spoken exposition and application of Scripture, such as those offered in first-century synagogues or Christian congregations (Acts 13:15; 1 Tim. 4:13). Through his sermon, our author has brought exhortation, as he had urged his hearers to do for "one another" (Heb. 3:13; 10:25) and as God himself had done for them (6:18; 12:5). To support his exhortation to "bear with" the sermon (cf. 2 Tim. 4:3), the preacher appeals to its brevity. Previously he had abridged where he could have elaborated (Heb. 9:5; 11:32), accommodating his hearers' attention span.

The author elaborates on his intention to return to his hearers (13:23; cf. v. 19) by mentioning that Timothy “has been released” from imprisonment and will accompany him “if he comes soon.” By this news the author shows that he too remembers those in prison (10:34; 13:3). Timothy is known to the audience, so he needs no further identification. He is probably the Timothy who served as Paul’s associate (Acts 16:1–4; 1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 1:1; 1 and 2 Timothy). In the early church this mention of Timothy encouraged the tradition that Paul wrote Hebrews, but arguments against Pauline authorship are stronger (cf. Introduction). The NT never mentions Timothy’s imprisonment, but his presence with Paul while the apostle was imprisoned (Phil. 2:19–24) makes this scenario likely.

13:24 The exchange of greetings between a letter’s author and those with him, on the one hand, and its recipients, on the other, is customary in NT correspondence. Here our author gives precedence to “all your leaders,” reinforcing their authority, in case some in the congregation still fail to accord them the respect their office warrants (Heb. 13:17). He then greets “all the saints,” expressing inclusivity and reinforcing their unity (cf. Phil. 1:1; 4:21). “Those who come from Italy,” who were with the author and asked him to convey their greetings, might be people residing *in* Italy. But the ESV is probably correct: with the author are believers who now sojourn as expatriates *away from* Italy and wish to send greetings home. Perhaps they were exiled when Emperor Claudius banned Jews from the imperial capital (AD 49), as Aquila and his wife Priscilla had been (Acts 18:2). See Introduction: Date and Occasion.

13:25 The closing benediction, though similar to many others in the NT,³⁸ is filled with meaning because of the rich exposition of grace throughout this sermon-letter. Our preacher has used “grace” (*charis*) to identify God’s undeserved favor that:

- ordained the redemptive plan in which Christ “[tasted] death” for all his brothers (2:9);
- flows from God’s throne of grace to give timely help (4:16);
- characterizes the Spirit of God (10:19);
- epitomizes believers’ final inheritance and the means by which they reach it (12:15);
- strengthens hearts through faith in Christ’s priestly mediation (13:9).

Hebrews shows God’s grace *with us* in other ways. God acknowledges as sons and leads to glory (2:10) those who required purification of their consciences. This could be achieved only by the blood of Christ, shed to redeem us from the transgressions committed under the first covenant (9:13–15). Though once excluded from his presence by our defiance and defilement, we can now draw near in confident assurance of his welcome (10:19–22). We are receiving a kingdom that cannot

³⁸ Identical wording appears in Titus 3:15. More briefly, “Grace be with you” is found at Colossians 4:18; 1 Timothy 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:22. Typically Paul’s benedictions invoke “the grace of our Lord Jesus [Christ]” (Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 16:23; 2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23; 1 Thess. 5:28; 2 Thess. 3:18; Philem. 25; cf. Rev. 22:21).

be shaken, and this gift from God makes us grateful and eager to offer worship that pleases him (12:28). Amid the dangers of our earthly pilgrimage, we have the promise of his constant presence and strong protection: “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (13:5). God’s grace is indeed *with* us.

Response

Lifelong endurance of faith in Christ is a daunting calling, even though its destination (the heavenly Jerusalem) is infinitely desirable. Obstacles, enemies, pressures, and distractions loom on all sides. Our preacher blends personal news and greetings with rich pronouncements of blessing from the God of peace and grace to leave with us what we need in order to persevere in our wilderness trek to the ultimate Promised Land. We need the care of the church, with leaders who speak God’s word truly, live it faithfully, protect us vigilantly, and remember their accountability to Jesus. In response to such leaders, we need teachable minds and humble hearts, especially when their duty compels them to speak a “word of exhortation.” Such leaders need us to pray for them, that through God’s grace their consciences will remain clear and their ministries unhindered. Most of all, we need the gracious blessing of God through Jesus Christ, working within us and among us to make us willing and able to do his will with all our hearts, offering worship that is pleasing in his sight.

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JAMES

Robert L. Plummer

INTRODUCTION TO JAMES

Title

“The Letter of James” is one of seven “general,” or “catholic,” letters in the NT, so named because they were viewed by some early Christians as addressing the universal church rather than particular local congregations. In Greek, the author’s name is *Iakōbos*, a transliteration of the Hebrew name Jacob. After centuries of transmission through various languages, the name *Iakōbos* came to be rendered as “James” in English.

Author

Early church testimony agreed that the author of this letter is James, the half brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55; 1 Cor. 15:7) and leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12:17; 15:13–21; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9–12). At least three other persons named James are mentioned in the NT (the son of Zebedee [Mark 1:19; Acts 12:2], the son of Alphaeus [Mark 3:18], and the father of Judas [Luke 6:16]), and despite occasional creative suggestions,¹ none is viewed as a serious contender for authorship of this letter. Skeptical modern scholars sometimes claim that the letter was written pseudonymously in the name of James, even though the early church consistently condemned pseudonymity.

Date and Occasion

The early church historian Eusebius (AD 260–340), recording the words of Hegesippus (c. 110–180), reports that James was martyred by zealous anti-Christian Jews in 62. The Jewish historian Josephus (AD 37–100) provides historical corroboration of James’s martyrdom. Obviously, if this letter came from James’s hand, it must have preceded his death. Speculating on the early Jewish context of James’s readers and his apparent lack of more explicit interaction with Pauline categories, evangelical scholars favor a date in the mid-40s. If that date is correct, James may have been written before any other book of the NT.

¹ John Calvin proposed James, the son of Alphaeus, as the author (*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. and ed., John Owen [repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999], 277).

Genre and Literary Features

James is a letter, but one very different from the Pauline letters. James reads more like a series of transcribed mini-homilies than an actual letter. For a modern analogy to this form of spiritual communication, one need look no further than a pastor's blog.

While various overarching literary structures have been proposed for James, perhaps it is best to focus on discrete discourse units of the letter while recognizing epistolary motifs. Within the original Greek text, the repetition of similar sounds sometimes serves to stitch together seemingly diverse material (cf. comment on 1:2–4).

Theology of James

James focuses on the behavior and speech true Christians should exhibit. James calls the recipients of his letter to repent of double-mindedness and to be whole, consistent, and single-hearted in their Christian faith and living. Various theological motifs reappear throughout the book: (1) God's purposes in trials (James 1:2–12; 5:7–11), (2) the reality of sin and the need to resist temptation (1:13–15; 4:7–10), (3) the necessity of godly speech (1:26; 3:1–12; 4:11–12; 5:12), (4) the recognition that works are the absolutely essential evidence of true faith (1:19–26; 2:14–26; 3:17), (5) God's concern for the poor (1:9, 27; 2:1–13; 5:1–11), (6) the coming judgment of the rich (2:5–7; 5:1–6), (6) the necessity and power of prayer (1:5–7; 5:13–18), and (7) the need for repentance from sin and concern for those who are straying (1:22–25; 4:7–11; 5:19–20).

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

Having been saved by grace and declared "sons of God" (cf. Rom. 8:14; Gal. 3:26), Christians are called to live consistently in their new status. This new way of life is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, who indwells all true believers. James's letter should be thought of primarily as instruction to persons who are born again and are now seeking to live as faithful disciples of Christ.

The believer who reads the letter of James, or who sits under its preaching, should experience conviction of sin. The Holy Spirit takes the Word of God (as written in the letter) and presses it upon the heart of the believer. For example, the modern Christian who reads James 4:13–17 may become convicted of his presumptuous plans for the future—plans that fail to acknowledge both his creaturely dependence and the sovereignty of God. A proper response, then, is repentance to God the Father for one's presumption, a deeper treasuring of the perfect life and sacrificial death of Jesus, and a renewed vision of humble dependence made possible by the indwelling Spirit.

Preaching from James

Because of its practical bent, the letter of James is a favorite of modern Christians. The letter divides nicely into thirteen discourse units for verse-by-verse preaching.

In expounding the text, the preacher should regularly remind the congregation that the letter's exhortations assume the finished work of Christ. So, e.g., as a parishioner listens to a sermon on James 3:1–12, he may become convicted of how wickedly he has spoken of a coworker. Yet the sermon should not simply call the Christian to “do better” but should urge him to repent. Perhaps the hearer needs to confess his sin to the maligned party or to other believers (5:16). He certainly needs to look to Jesus' perfect life and atoning death for his justification and to resolve, by the power of the Spirit, to slander no longer.

Those sitting under the preaching of James's letter should have a renewed sense of both the depth of their own sinfulness and the sufficiency of Jesus to cover that sin. The Spirit of God will take the biblical text and impress it upon our hearts, conforming us in greater measure to the image of Christ while also causing us to groan for the Lord's return and the final restoration of all things.

Interpretive Challenges

Skeptics have accused James of being a lightly edited synagogue sermon, and have noted that it contains only two explicit references to Jesus (James 1:1; 2:1). In reality, however, much of the book parallels Jesus' teaching in the Gospels, especially the Sermon on the Mount. Just as Jesus gave his disciples clear instruction on how they were to talk, act, pray, work, and live, so James conveys those teachings to a new generation of Christians.

Critics have also claimed that James contradicts Paul on the doctrine of justification. While Paul says that faith alone justifies (Rom. 3:28), James insists that faith alone does not justify (James 2:24). Much apparent tension dissolves when one notes that Paul and James are addressing different theological errors. Paul attacks the false doctrine that salvation can be obtained through obeying the law—whether that be the moral law written on the conscience, the law of Jewish rites, or some combination thereof. James, on the other hand, attacks nominal Christianity, which intellectually affirms orthodox faith but displays no transformed life. Such empty faith, James teaches, is no different than the “faith” of demons (James 2:19). Likewise, Paul affirms that “fruit” will accompany genuine saving faith (Gal. 5:22–23). What matters, Paul says, is “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). James agrees (James 2:22). See the comments below on James 2:14–26 for a fuller discussion of Paul versus James on the doctrine of justification.

Outline

- I. Epistolary Opening (1:1)
- II. The Wise Perspective on Trials (1:2–11)
 - A. The Divine Purpose in Trials (1:2–4)
 - B. The Wisdom Necessary to View Trials Rightly (1:5–8)
 - C. The Trials of Poverty and Wealth (1:9–11)

- III. Trials, Temptations, and Gifts (1:12–18)
 - A. The Eschatological Reward for Enduring Trials (1:12)
 - B. The True Nature of Temptation in Fallen Humans (1:13–15)
 - C. The True Nature of God as Gift-Giver (1:16–18)
- IV. True Religion: Hearing and Obeying God's Word (1:19–27)
 - A. Receive the Implanted Word (1:19–21)
 - B. Be a Doer of the Word, Not Just a Hearer (1:22–25)
 - C. The Nature of True Religion (1:26–27)
- V. Warning against Sinful Partiality (2:1–13)
 - A. James's Command against Partiality (2:1)
 - B. Concrete Example of Economic Partiality (2:2–4)
 - C. God's View of the Poor (2:5–6a)
 - D. Inconsistency of Favoring the Wicked Rich (2:6b–7)
 - E. Scriptural Arguments for Impartial Love (2:8–13)
- VI. Faith and Works (2:14–26)
 - A. Faith without Works Is Useless (2:14)
 - B. Illustration of Useless Faith (2:15–17)
 - C. Correcting an Interlocutor (2:18–20)
 - D. The Example of Abraham (2:21–24)
 - E. The Example of Rahab (2:25)
 - F. Faith without Works Is Dead (2:26)
- VII. The Powerful and Dangerous Tongue (3:1–12)
 - A. The Teacher's Tongue and Judgment (3:1–2)
 - B. Illustrations of the Tongue's Power and Potential for Harm (3:3–8)
 - C. The Hypocritical Slanderous Tongue (3:9–10)
 - D. Closing Illustrations against Hypocritical Slander (3:11–12)
- VIII. True and False Wisdom (3:13–18)
 - A. True Wisdom Demonstrated by Actions (3:13)
 - B. The Nature and Fruit of False Wisdom (3:14–16)
 - C. The Nature and Fruit of True Wisdom (3:17–18)
- IX. Community Discord and a Call to Repentance (4:1–12)
 - A. Description of the Community's Conflicts and Motives (4:1–3)
 - B. Prophetic Denunciation and Call to Repentance (4:4–10)
 - C. A Rebuke of Critical, Judgmental Speech (4:11–12)
- X. Presumptive Planning Rebuked (4:13–17)
 - A. Presumptive Attitude Illustrated (4:13)
 - B. The Transience of Life and the Sovereignty of God (4:14–15)
 - C. Closing Rebuke and Applicable Proverb (4:16–17)
- XI. Condemnation of the Wicked Rich (5:1–6)²
 - A. Declaration of the Coming Judgment (5:1)
 - B. Hoarded Treasures (5:2–3)

² I was influenced by Doug Moo in outlining this discourse unit (*The Letter of James*, PNTC [Leicester: Apollos; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000], 209–210).

- C. Defrauded Wages (5:4)
- D. Luxurious Lifestyle (5:5)
- E. Mistreatment and Murder of the Righteous (5:6)
- XII. Endurance and Integrity in Suffering (5:7–12)
 - A. Waiting for the Lord's Return (5:7–9)
 - B. The Example of the Prophets and Job (5:10–11)
 - C. Integrity of Speech: The Rejection of Oaths (5:12)
- XIII. Instructions on Prayer and Concern for Those Straying (5:13–20)
 - A. Prayer Appropriate to Any Situation (5:13)
 - B. Prayer for the Sick (5:14–15)
 - C. Confession and Prayer in Community (5:16)
 - D. The Example of Elijah (5:17–18)
 - E. Concern for the Straying Christian (5:19–20)

JAMES 1:1

1 James, a servant¹ of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:
Greetings.

¹ For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface

Section Overview

Following standard epistolary format, James begins by extending a greeting and identifying both himself and the recipients of his letter.

Section Outline

- I. Epistolary Opening (1:1)

Comment

1:1 Early church tradition tells us that the author who identifies himself here as “James” was the biological half brother of Jesus, son of Mary and Joseph. James’s silence regarding his familial relationship with Jesus reminds us that the early church did not follow a hereditary leadership pattern but rather a leadership structure grounded upon submission to Christ Jesus as Lord.

James describes himself as a *doulos*, translated here by the ESV as “servant.” Most likely, the term *doulos* is intended to communicate the authoritative and representative nature of James as God’s spokesman, “a servant of the Lord” (cf. Moses in Deut. 34:5), as well as the Lord’s complete ownership of and authority over James (i.e., James as the Lord’s “slave”).

In verse 1, James places “God” and “the Lord Jesus Christ” side-by-side, implying the equality of the Father and the Son within the Trinity. The third member of the Trinity, God the Spirit, appears in the letter as the rarely identified (e.g., James 4:5) but frequently implied agent of transformed Christian behavior.

James calls his readers “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” This diaspora language recalls the exile of Israel by Assyria in 722 BC and the exile of Judah by Babylon in 586 BC. These scatterings of God’s covenant people out of the Promised Land came as divine judgment for their rebellion.

The Babylonian exile ended with the return of the Jews under Cyrus (537 BC; cf. Matt. 1:12). Yet, in another sense, the Jews were still hoping for a greater national restoration and a decisive divine intervention against their enemies. James picks up these themes by describing the early Christians to whom he is writing as the true people of God—“the twelve tribes”—who are now scattered from their real homeland (a renewed heaven and earth) as they long for the Lord’s return (James 5:7). In light of the apparent early date of James’s letter, perhaps the language in 1:1 is also intended to bear its more literal sense, alluding to the Jewish biological lineage of James’s audience, now scattered outside the traditional Holy Land (Palestine) because of their faithfulness to the Lord Jesus. The events of Acts 11:19 may serve as the background to the letter, with James remaining in Jerusalem and now communicating by letter to those Jewish believers previously under his immediate care (cf. Acts 11:19: “Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews”; cf. also Acts 8:1).

In verse 1, James employs a common Hellenistic epistolary salutation, *chairein*, “Greetings.” This epistolary formula is used in only two other places in the NT: by Claudius Lysias in a letter to the Roman governor, Felix (Acts 23:26); and in another letter from James (Acts 15:23).

Response

James’s identification of himself—not as the half brother of Jesus but as “a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ”—challenges leaders to remember that their authority and teaching are valid only insofar as they submit to Jesus as our sovereign Lord, looking to him as the Messiah (“Christ”) who fulfills God’s promises.

This first verse of James also implicitly teaches an exclusive soteriology. One can never be a true servant of God unless one is consciously submitted to God’s Son (1 John 2:23). “Salvation [is found] in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

James further reminds us that, regardless of our comforts or afflictions in this life, we are not at home. We are dispersed as God’s people throughout a rebellious world. We are aliens and strangers (Heb. 11:13–14), longing for the return of Jesus and the promise of a new heaven and new earth.

JAMES 1:2–11

²Count it all joy, my brothers,¹ when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass² he will pass away. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters*; also verses 16, 19

²Or *a wild flower*

Section Overview

Several motifs emerge in this first unit of the letter’s body: perseverance amid difficulty, the sovereignty of God, prayer, wisdom, faith, doubt, wealth, poverty, and the brevity of life. This section of text divides naturally into three subsections, as represented in the outline below. First, James exhorts his readers to take a divine perspective on their trials, knowing that God is maturing their faith. Second, to hold such a perspective on trials requires wisdom—and if believers lack such wisdom, they should call out to God in trusting prayer. Third, James briefly addresses one of the main trials his readers were likely experiencing: economic privation. Wealth can also be a trial to the few who experience riches in this life, and James warns the rich person to live in light of eternity, “because like a flower of the grass he will pass away” (v. 10).

Section Outline

- II. The Wise Perspective on Trials (1:2–11)
 - A. The Divine Purpose in Trials (1:2–4)
 - B. The Wisdom Necessary to View Trials Rightly (1:5–8)
 - C. The Trials of Poverty and Wealth (1:9–11)

Comment

1:2–4 The second word in the Greek text of verse 2, *charan* (“joy”), corresponds closely in sound to the last word of verse 1, *chairein*. Epistolary sections of James are often stitched together by similar-sounding words, pointing to the author’s skill in the Greek language. Some modern skeptics have protested that a Jewish man raised in Nazareth could never have attained such skill in Greek, but archaeological evidence (e.g., ossuary inscriptions) confirms the widespread use of Greek in first-century Palestine. We should also remember that James may well have employed an amanuensis (secretary), as Paul did (Rom. 16:22). James would have approved the final draft of a letter sent in his name, but it is possible that a secretary fluent in Greek may have helped in the translation or editing of this sermon-like letter.

Continuing in humble fashion, James does not apply a heavy apostolic hand upon these scattered Christians. As a servant of the Lord (James 1:1), he addresses them as “my brothers.” An ESV footnote here rightly observes that the Greek word translated brothers (*adelphoi*) should be understood as referring to both men and women in the Christian community, as “brothers” is similarly understood in the church today.

James contains the highest frequency of imperatives of any book in the NT, with the first command appearing in 1:2: “Count it all joy . . .” James calls on Christians to reckon any situation, however difficult, as an occasion of intense joy. The Greek word for “all” here serves as an intensifier of “joy.” In other words, not every element of suffering is joy. But, however severe one’s suffering, every trial is a time for intense joy.

This complete joy does not reside in the trials themselves but is concomitant with them—“when you meet trials of various kinds.” The *occasion* of the trial is a matter of rejoicing, because even in the darkest hour, God is still in control and his divine purposes will prevail. What others mean for evil, God will work for good (Gen. 50:20). All things will work together for the good of those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Three Greek words, all beginning with “p” sounds, underlie the phrase translated “you meet trials of various kinds” (*peirasmois peripesēte poikilois*; James 1:2), an alliterative pattern that again demonstrates the compositional skill of the author. Because James goes on to discuss all sorts of trials—from economic injustice (5:4) to physical sickness (5:14)—it is important to see the “trials of various kinds” here as referring to any difficulties Christians face in this fallen world. The Greek word for “trial” (*peirasmos*) can also mean “temptation,” and only the context indicates which nuance is intended. Some scholars have seen an intentional ambiguity throughout the letter—with James implying that trials (which God brings; 2:20–23) confront the Christian at a moment of temptation (which can never be attributed to God, since he tempts no one to evil; 1:13). Most English translators see the context of 1:2 as sufficiently narrowing the semantic range of *peirasmos* to “trial” and translate accordingly.

Trials can cause great anxiety in the hearts of believers, but this understandable restlessness can be calmed by the reassuring knowledge (“you know”; v. 3) that God is using such trials to refine the Christian’s faith and produce “steadfastness”—endurance or stick-to-it-ness.³

In verse 4, we find the letter’s second imperative: “Let steadfastness have its full effect.” In other words, growth in Christian character (and, specifically here, growth in “steadfastness” or endurance) is a process in which the believer is called to submit to the Master’s sanctifying plan.

The purpose of divinely orchestrated character formation, James tells his readers, is that “you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (v. 4). This exalted description seems eschatological in nature. That is, only in the ultimate glorified state could any Christian decisively be described as “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” And yet, throughout the letter, James clearly intends his readers to heed his instructions and, as a result, see visible evidence of obedience in this earthly life (1:22, 27). Perhaps it is best to say that we experience a partial fulfillment of James’s purpose statement in this imperfect age. God does indeed mature us and make us “whole.” Yet the believer awaits the glorified state to enjoy complete and absolute perfection. Though changed and changing, Christians will continue to fight against sin. It is instructive that the prayer Jesus taught his disciples includes a request for divine forgiveness (Matt. 6:12). The justification of believers is secure before God’s throne on the basis of Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death (Rom. 8:30–39), but we continue to need God’s fatherly/relational forgiveness every day (1 John 1:9). The normal and healthy Christian life is one of regular repentance and faith (cf. thesis number 1 of Luther’s “Ninety-Five Theses”).

1:5–8 The reasons for shifting to a discussion of wisdom in verse 5 are not immediately obvious. Such staccato style led Martin Luther (1483–1546) to charge James with throwing things together haphazardly.⁴ Similarly, Martin Dibelius (1883–1947), an influential German NT scholar, accused the letter of being an unskilled pastiche of proverbial literature. More sympathetically, we see that wisdom is an appropriate topic to discuss at this juncture in James’s argument because wisdom is needed to view trials from God’s perspective—i.e., as faith-refining instruments. Of course, James does not explicitly connect wisdom with trials in verses 5–8, but given the immediately surrounding context, it is difficult to see how his original readers would not have related the wisdom discussed in verses 5–8 to the trials discussed in verses 2–4 and 9–11.

“Let him ask God” (v. 5) is a third-person imperative in Greek, not a statement of permission. The Greek phrase could be translated more idiomatically, “The person who lacks wisdom must ask God . . .” God is described in verse 5 as the one “who gives generously to all without reproach.” The Greek word translated

³ Perhaps a decade ago, I somewhere read about “stick-to-it-ness” as a translation of *hypomonē*. I regret that I cannot locate the source.

⁴ Luther, of course, did not like James’s discussion of justification (James 2:24), finding it contradictory to Paul (Rom. 3:28). Luther did not remove James from his German translation of the Bible, but he did move the letter to the end of the NT.

“generously” is *haplōs*, which can also mean “unwaveringly” or “without hesitation.” James is contrasting God with the fickle human of verses 6–8. The doubting man is double-minded, unstable, and erratic as a choppy wave in the storm-tossed sea. God, on the other hand, acts with unwavering generosity. He does not offer a gift only to pull it back a moment later.

God is further described as one who gives “without reproach.” The underlying negated Greek term here is *oneidizō*, which the BDAG lexicon defines as “find[ing] fault in a way that demeans the other.” For persons who have suffered “gifts” or “help” from a parent or superior who was resentful or insulting, what good news it is to discover that God does not give in that way! His giving is transparent, without reserve or hesitation, kindly responsive to the needs of the recipient.

Regarding the person who asks for wisdom, James says plainly, “it will be given him” (v. 5). Elsewhere, promises of answered prayer are sometimes qualified with the condition that the request must be made according to God’s will (e.g., 1 John 5:14). Here, James’s straightforward statement is a reminder that God’s clearly revealed moral will is for people to be wise and to know him (Ezek. 18:23). Lady Wisdom calls out in the streets for any and all to come and dine at her banquet (Prov. 9:1–6). A reader of James’s letter can be assured that as he becomes aware of his lack of wisdom (especially the wisdom to view trials rightly), he may call out to God and expect his prayer to be answered from the loving and reliable dispenser of true wisdom.

James does, nevertheless, offer one qualification concerning the prayer for wisdom. It must be offered “in faith, with no doubting” (1:6). James goes on to describe the doubting petitioner with colorful images: he is like a blown and tossed ocean billow (v. 6), double-minded and unstable in all his ways (v. 8). James says firmly in verse 7, “That person [i.e., the doubter] must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”

James’s teaching echoes several places in Jesus’ earthly ministry in which the Lord demanded faith of those who came to him. In Matthew 9:29, as Jesus touched the two blind men’s eyes, he said, “According to your faith be it done to you.” To the father of the demon-possessed child, who was wavering in unbelief, Jesus said, “All things are possible for one who believes” (Mark 9:23). When Jesus was asked by his disciples why they could not cast out an evil spirit, he responded, “Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you” (Matt. 17:20). Likewise, the author of Hebrews warns, “Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6).

1:9–11 In verse 9, James again swiftly shifts topics. Yet, given the broader context of trials and wisdom (i.e., the wisdom necessary to view trials rightly), the poverty and riches discussed in verses 9–11 should likely be seen as commonly experienced trials for which wisdom is needed.

James commands “the lowly brother [to] boast in his exaltation” (v. 9). James does not use a common Greek word referring narrowly to economic poverty (*ptōchos*). Instead, by employing *tapeinos* (“lowly” or “humble”), he draws a thread from the rich tapestry of prior biblical revelation in which those who are brought low by financial poverty also frequently find an accompanying poverty of spirit (humility) that is pleasing to God (e.g., 1 Sam. 2:8; Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20).

James calls on the “lowly” or poor Christian brother to find a divine perspective on his trial. Indeed, he is to “boast” or rejoice in his “exaltation” (James 1:9). James here could mean that the lowly brother should exult in his current high status of being, by faith, seated with Christ in heavenly places (Eph. 1:20). Or the exaltation mentioned here could have a forward-looking referent, anticipating the ultimate status of the lowly brother in his final, glorified state, free from all want or pain (Rev. 21:4).

The “rich” person likewise is to see his current temporary status from God’s perspective. The noun “brother” is likely implied; thus it is not simply the rich person but the rich Christian brother who must exercise divine wisdom to know how fleeting his outward status truly is. (Alternately, verse 10 has been taken as a prophetic, condemnatory statement directed at nonbelievers oppressing lowly Christians. Such an interpretation, while fitting well with James’s language in chapter 5, seems unlikely in chapter 1.)

Response

The teaching of James in 1:2–11 is applicable to every Christian reader. If a Christian is not currently undergoing a trial, he or she soon will be. And when they lose their job or are treated unkindly or must care for a disabled child or become ill or lose their mobile phone or face any other trial, large or small, they must in that moment remember the sovereignty of God and the plan of God to use that trial to produce spiritual steadfastness in them. The Christian is called to respond in faith and love rather than in resignation, despair, anger, vindictiveness, or any other variety of possible sinful responses.

Who is sufficient for these things? No one, apart from the empowerment of God’s Spirit. Thus Christians must ask for wisdom to view their trials from this eternal vantage point. Have we prayed for wisdom to view trials in such a way? How many times have we read this exhortation but failed to pray? How many times have we audibly or silently grumbled about trials rather than rejoiced in them?

When James calls for faith, he is not calling for Christians to work up some sort of invisible faith-o-meter so that they “feel” the prayer being answered in an overly specific way. Rather, Christians are to approach God trustingly—knowing he is powerful, good, and kindly disposed to them because of the relationship secured through Christ’s perfect life and atoning death. The opposite of such faith is to believe that God does not really care, is not good, and does not keep his fatherly promises in Christ.

Sensitive Christians can sometimes fret a great deal over whether they have enough faith. In James's strong words concerning doubt, he is not addressing such sensitive Christians (e.g., the character "Much Afraid" in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*). James is rebuking the presumptuous and erratic petitioner who seeks to live independently of God but, when desperation or inclination strikes, offers up a quick, unbelieving plea. That person cannot expect to receive anything from God.

Most Christians recognize poverty as a trial and would readily see the need for reliance upon the Lord in economic privation. James reminds us that riches are also a trial—a terribly dangerous one, according to Jesus (Matt. 19:23–24). Likewise, only with divinely given wisdom can we truly have God's perspective on the transitory nature of riches and store up for ourselves real treasure in heaven (Mark 10:21).

JAMES 1:12–18

¹²Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.¹ ¹⁸Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

¹Some manuscripts *variation due to a shadow of turning*

Section Overview

Picking up the earlier language of "endurance" and "trials" (*peirasmoi*, which, depending on the context, can also mean "temptations"), James sets forth the eschatological hope of eternal life as a motivator for Christians currently undergoing difficulties.

When a person encounters trials, he is often tempted to react in a sinful way, but James makes clear that any pull toward sin is not from God. According to James, fallen human nature leans toward sin. We are crooked trees. Even Christians, while experiencing genuine and progressive transformation in this life, continue to find their hearts "prone to wander."⁵ Instead of seeking a scapegoat for such attractions

⁵ From the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing," by Robert Robinson.

to sin, Christians should humbly resist the sinful inclinations within themselves by pursuing repentance from sin and faith in God's empowering presence.

God does not send temptations to his servants. Instead, he is a trustworthy giver of good gifts. The preeminent gift is spiritual rebirth, brought about by God's effective, life-giving Word. The miracle of regeneration in the lives of Christians anticipates the renewal of all creation at the Lord's return.

Section Outline

III. Trials, Temptations, and Gifts (1:12–18)

- A. The Eschatological Reward for Enduring Trials (1:12)
- B. The True Nature of Temptation in Fallen Humans (1:13–15)
- C. The True Nature of God as Gift-Giver (1:16–18)

Comment

1:12 Reflecting on the language of “steadfastness” and “trials” from the previous section (1:2, 3), James reassures his readers of the blessedness of the person who remains steadfast under trial. By describing the steadfast person as “blessed,” James means that this person is living in such a way as to enjoy God's favorable approval. Ultimately, all of the trials in this life can be lumped together and spoken of as a proving ground or test. James does just that, declaring that the person who has stood the test (i.e., endured faithfully in life's trials) “will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (v. 12).

The promise of “the crown of life” teaches that Christians who endure to the end will receive eternal life as their victor's crown (cf. Matt. 10:22; Rev. 2:10). Taken in isolation, verse 12 could sound as if Christians earned eternal life through their own perseverance. This is not the case. Instead, true believers will persevere through difficulties, showing that they truly belong to God (1 John 2:19). In Jesus' parable of the sower, some seed sprang up quickly but did not endure to produce a harvest (Mark 4:1–9). Likewise, James tells us that ultimately it is how one runs the entire race of life, not just how one begins, that reveals whether one will inherit eternal life.

God uses warnings as an instrument of fulfilling his promise to keep his people secure to the end.⁶ Indeed, even as the crown of life is set before us as a motivation for endurance, James tell us this crown has been “promised” on the basis not of performance but of relationship (i.e., “to those who love him”). Yet, true love evidences itself in behavior. God demands a loving heart in submission to him, which shows itself in outward obedience. Through the transforming power of the gospel of Christ, God “gives what he himself demands.”⁷ That is, God demands that his people demonstrate love, but he himself saves them and transforms them into a loving community (John 13:35).

⁶ Cf. Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001).

⁷ Attributed to Augustine of Hippo, as cited by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989; repr. 1997), 279.

1:13–15 The Greek word *peirasmos* (v. 12) can be translated as “trial” or “temptation,” and James seems to play off that linguistic ambiguity here. Every trial also confronts Christians with a potential temptation—will they sin by lashing out in anger or unbelief?

God is sovereign in all matters (Matt. 10:29) and appoints refining trials for his people (e.g., Gen. 22:1; Ex. 16:4; Deut. 8:2–3). Yet one can never say that God tempts his people. Temptation seeks to entice a person to sin. God never works that way. Why? One reason is that God is totally sinless (“God cannot be tempted with evil”; James 1:13). A sinless being is incapable of inciting others to sin.

Instead of blaming God for the enticement to sin, fallen humans need look no further than their own deceptive hearts (Jer. 17:9). James describes the origin of temptation as a person’s own “desire” (*epithymia*). By this term, James refers to the sinful inclinations of one’s fallen human nature, left unchecked. In graphic terms, James depicts this indwelling evil desire as both trapping (“luring”) and sinfully tantalizing (“enticing”) the victim (1:14). Similar to the language of Proverbs, James cautions believers of the danger of allowing sinful inclinations to chart one’s course in life. If allowed in the driver’s seat, sin usurps and tyrannizes. Similar to the seemingly inescapable self-destruction of the life of a drug addict, deference to sin lays a track of destructive disobedience in one’s mind and heart that is not easily reversed.

In focusing on the role fallen human nature plays in one’s sinful choices, James is not denying the role of the Devil as tempter (Luke 22:31–32; 1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Pet. 5:8) nor the influence of the rebellious world as falsely alluring (1 John 2:15–16). In his or her actual daily struggle, the Christian rarely discerns whether temptations are arising distinctly from the flesh (sinful nature), the Devil, or the world. Yet such ambiguity does not alter the clear biblical calls for resistance!

James paints a picture of a downward spiral of giving into temptation. First, evil desire entices and lures (or traps) the complicit victim. Next, as this indwelling evil desire is allowed to run unchecked, it “gives birth to sin.” In other words, just as conception leads naturally to childbirth, giving free rein to sinful inclinations naturally results in discrete moral transgressions. Just as water runs downhill, so evil desire, if allowed to pursue its “gravitational inclination,” runs down into sinful activity.

James warns that specific acts of sin are not the end of this sordid progression. Rather, “when [sin] is fully grown [it] brings forth death” (James 1:15). The language here reminds us of God’s warning to Adam in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:17: “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”). There are two paths in this life—one that is “easy,” which leads to eternal death, and one that is “hard,” which leads to eternal life—and few choose the correct one, Jesus told his disciples (Matt. 7:13–14). To those who think they can safely dally with sin, James offers a blunt reminder of where a life surrendered to sin ultimately leads: it leads to eternal death. Think carefully before you allow sin to pilot your plane, James warns; you will crash into

hell. “Follow your passion” is not good advice when that passion is the unchecked inclination of one’s fallen human nature.

1:16–18 Throughout his letter, especially as he delivers many hard-hitting rebukes, James regularly reminds his readers that he is addressing them as his “beloved brothers” (v. 16, see also 1:2, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19). Such language is not merely functional (indicating a shift in topic) but also sincerely sets James alongside his readers as equally accountable to his letter’s teaching, while also reminding them that he cares for them.

Having assured these early Christians that God does not cause temptations (1:13), James clarifies that God instead provides something else. In poetic style he writes, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above.” Such broad language attributes to God anything good, beautiful, or excellent in this world, recognizing, of course, that God is the creator of all things. Even evil things are merely perverted forms of his good creation. God is described as “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” James chooses the term “Father” here to magnify God’s providential and creative power. Indeed, it is God who created the “lights” (sun, moon, stars). Yet, unlike such created heavenly bodies, which wax, wane, and move through the heavens (with “variation or shadow due to change”), God himself is completely reliable and unwavering in his benevolent disposition.

One could list countless good gifts that God gives by “common grace” to all of humanity (e.g., Acts 17:25), but when Christians think of God’s greatest and most perfect gift, they think of salvation. In speaking of the gift of salvation, James strikingly begins with the phrase “Of his own will” (*boulētheis*, a Greek participle, likely causal in meaning). Salvation is ultimately a gift that finds its origin in the efficacious divine will. Why does a person become a Christian? Outwardly, we see him repent and believe, but this visible behavior is a response to the prior work of God.

“Of his own will” (or, “Because he so chose”) God “brought us forth by the word of truth.” The language of “bringing forth” here refers to birth. God spiritually birthed or regenerated Christians by the word of truth. (Note again how James includes himself in the same needy class as his readers by using the pronoun “us” rather than “you.”) The “word of truth” is the true word of God, here referring more narrowly to the orally declared gospel of Christ. This declared word, now preserved in the NT, is depicted as the instrument of regeneration, bringing about the spiritual rebirth of dead sinners in obedience to the divine will.

Regenerate believers are further described as “a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.” By explicitly adding “a kind” (*tina*) to modify “firstfruits,” James highlights the metaphorical nature of his language. “Firstfruits” here alludes to OT laws mandating that the earliest part of the agricultural harvest be offered in gratitude to God in anticipation of the expected remainder of the harvest (Ex. 23:19; Lev. 2:12; Num. 18:12). In choosing this language, James reminds his audience that the Good Shepherd has many more lost sheep to gather into his sheepfold (John 10:16;

Mark 13:10). And ultimately, at the Lord's return, all the created order will be transformed (Rom. 8:19–23), even as God's elect people now experience a partial, proleptic (forward-looking) outworking of that transformative power.

Response

If believers overemphasize God's sovereignty, they perhaps may fail to take responsibility for their sin. Few of us would explicitly blame God for temptation, but in failing to view sin as filthy rebellion against a holy God, are we, in essence, blaming God instead of ourselves for our sin?

Several Christian traditions hold out the promise that believers can reach a level of sinless perfection or wholehearted surrender in this life.⁸ A nuanced biblical view sees Christians as transformed and empowered yet continuing to fight against sinful inclinations until we die or Jesus returns. A Christian is often discouraged by the evil desires he finds arising in his own heart—even after many years of following Christ. The apostle Paul gave voice to many weary Christian hearts when he wrote,

I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Rom. 7:22–25)

In agreement with Paul's teaching, the Puritan pastor Richard Baxter (1615–1691) provided this instruction to married couples: "Remember still that you are both diseased persons, full of infirmities; and therefore expect the fruit of those infirmities in each other; and make not a strange matter of it, as if you had never known of it before."⁹ Acknowledging our fallen nature and the power of deceptive sin should lead us to renewed humble dependence upon God for resisting sin, and, when we have failed in resisting, reliance upon his grace to repent and be restored to fellowship with our loving heavenly Father.

In this part of the letter, James also reminds us to move forward in gratitude and confidence, for it is God who graciously purposed our regeneration ("Of his own will"; James 1:18). It is through God's indwelling Spirit and powerful Word that he will continue to preserve us to the end. Our own salvation and partial transformation now should cause us to long more eagerly for our full transformation alongside an entirely remade creation in the new heavens and new earth.

⁸ Cf. Andy Naselli's extremely helpful critique of these theological traditions in his published dissertation, *Let Go and Let God? A Survey and Analysis of Keswick Theology*, available as a digital volume at www.logos.com, or see www.andynaselli.com.

⁹ Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, in *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London: George Virtue, 1838; repr., Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2008), 433.

JAMES 1:19–27

¹⁹ Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹ Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

²² But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

²⁶ If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. ²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Section Overview

Doug Moo argues that the dominant theme of James is “spiritual wholeness.”¹⁰ Certainly in this section (1:19–27) we cannot miss James’s emphasis on the believer’s living consistently with his confession. Christians should exhibit true religion by hearing and obeying God’s Word.

In the first subsection (vv. 19–21), James calls on believers to “receive . . . the implanted word” (v. 21). The person who responds rightly to God’s indwelling, transformative word will give evidence of that reality through a gentle disposition toward others and a commitment to holiness.

In the second subsection (vv. 22–25), James attacks false, superficial spirituality. A person who hears the word of God and goes away with no recognizable transformation is as foolish as a man who looks in the mirror and immediately forgets what he looks like. Instead, God calls his people to peer into his Word, responding with repentance, faith, and obedience. In doing so, they will experience the freedom of living as God’s Spirit-transformed children.

In the third subsection (vv. 26–27), James says that someone may think he is religious, but if that person displays wicked speech, the true nature of his irreligious heart is exposed. True religion manifests itself in practical holiness and a loving concern for those in need.

¹⁰ Moo, *Letter of James*, 46.

Section Outline

- IV. True Religion: Hearing and Obeying God's Word (1:19–27)
 - A. Receive the Implanted Word (1:19–21)
 - B. Be a Doer of the Word, Not Just a Hearer (1:22–25)
 - C. The Nature of True Religion (1:26–27)

Comment

1:19–21 Through a formulaic imperative (“Know this”) and a vocative form (“my beloved brothers”), James indicates a shift in topic. In repeatedly addressing the congregation as “beloved brothers,” James keeps at the forefront of his correspondence the filial status he shares with his readers, as well as the reassurance of his genuine love for them.

In the previous subsection (1:12–18), James concluded by emphasizing God's regeneration of believers by “the word of truth,” resulting in their being “a kind of firstfruits” (v. 18). As firstfruits of God's renewed creation, Christians should exhibit in their conversations and emotional expressions the reality of the new creation. James, in unadorned proverbial style, tells believers to listen more, speak less, and resist anger (v. 19). One might protest that not all anger is bad and that God is frequently described as wrathful (e.g., Ex. 4:14; Num. 22:22; Deut. 11:17), but God is completely holy, and so his anger is without sin. Not so for humans, says James: “The anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:20). In other words, man's anger (i.e., the anger of a fallen human) is almost always tainted with sin (but cf. Eph. 4:26). Such anger does not manifest itself in obedient behavior reflecting God's righteousness.

In light of our corrupt speech patterns and overflowing anger, how can James's exhortation assist us? The answer to our dilemma is not to attempt to pull ourselves up by our own moral bootstraps but to respond with repentance and faith, to which James calls his readers in verse 21. James writes, “Put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness” (v. 21). “Filthiness” (*rhyparia*) emphasizes the dirty, rotten, unclean, defiling nature of wicked speech and sinful anger. By describing wickedness as “rampant,” James acknowledges the powerful, contagious, and multifarious expressions of sin we find in this broken world—especially in relation to sins of speech and anger.

Having established a call to repentance in the first half of verse 21, James moves on to the exercise of faith in the latter half of the verse. In humility, Christians are to recognize their utter spiritual bankruptcy and inability to transform themselves. We require a salvation from outside ourselves. Thankfully, when God regenerates the believer by “the word of truth” (v. 18), he also implants his saving and instructive Word in the believer's heart. In Jeremiah 31:33, God promises that in the new covenant era, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” James writes to new covenant believers who experience the fulfillment of this promise.

James declares that the divine Word implanted in Christians is “able to save your souls.” It is important to recognize that when NT authors use the verb *sōzō*

“save”) to refer to salvation (and not temporal healing), they are usually referring to a future deliverance from God’s wrath at the final judgment (e.g., Rom. 5:10). Modern, English-speaking evangelicals, on the other hand, frequently use the verb “save” to refer to one’s initial regeneration or coming to faith. James here clearly has the future aspect of salvation in mind. By focusing on the power of the implanted divine Word to save them ultimately, James implicitly warns his audience against presumption. In other words, James calls these ancient Christians not to passivity and nominalism but to a believing and obedient response to the Christ-wrought act of God in their hearts. The teaching of the apostle Paul is similar: “We are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

1:22–25 Although the Word of God is implanted into the Christian (v. 21), paradoxically, James can also speak of the Word of God as something external, to be heard and obeyed. The believer in whom the Word is implanted is called both to hear and to obey the external Word that resonates with the implanted Word. To respond to the external Word with passive hearing (and no visible response) is delusional. That is, the passive hearer is self-deceived, thinking he is spiritual simply because religious instruction is vibrating his auditory nerves. No, says James, you must put the Word into practice, not simply listen to it! Obedience to the Word of God is the true test of spirituality.

As a skilled preacher, James paints a scene from everyday life to illustrate his point. James declares that a man who hears the Word of God but does not obey it is like a person who looks in the mirror and, after stepping away, immediately forgets what he looks like (vv. 23–24). Commentators debate some of the finer points of this illustration. Why does James attach the genitival qualifier “natural” (*tēs geneseōs*) to the noun “face”? Most likely, *tēs geneseōs* means little more than we would mean by “own” in the English phrase, “his own face.”¹¹ Other scholars question how tightly James is drawing the analogy between a mirror and the Word of God. Is James perhaps implying that the man in his illustration has a visible flaw on his face that he should see and correct (analogous to the way the Word of God reveals our sin)? The most prudent path is to exercise exegetical restraint and not offer debatable nuances drawn from the illustration. The main points of comparison are clear: a superficial glance, followed by forgetfulness rather than action.

Rather than a quick glance, Christians are called to “look” into the “perfect law” or “law of liberty” (v. 25). The qualifiers “perfect” and “of liberty” remind us that James is not exhorting OT saints merely to study their Torah more thoroughly. Christians now live in the day of new covenant fulfillment, and while they must study, love, believe, and obey the Law (or OT Scripture), they do so recognizing it as fulfilled in Christ. Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17).

11 For the Greek expression *prosōpon tēs geneseōs* (v. 23), *The Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* offers the helpful gloss, “face he was born with” (ed. Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg, and Neva F. Miller [Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2005], s.v. γένεσις).

Similarly, the apostle John speaks of the light and victorious burden regenerate Christians take upon themselves in obeying God's commands (1 John 5:3–4; cf. also Matt. 11:30).

James says believers are called to both “look” and “persevere” in their sanctifying relationship to the Word of God (1:25). A heart with the *implanted* Word of God will love to continue hearing the *external* Word of God (i.e., the Word of God preached or read). And as a believer's mental, emotional, volitional, and spiritual focus is on the external Word, he will gain a maturing faith, bearing the external fruit of obedience. He will be “a doer who acts,” not a “hearer who forgets” (v. 25). As this transformed Christian goes about his life of faith-fueled, Word-empowered obedience, God's warm fatherly approval will rest upon him (i.e., he will be “blessed”; v. 25).

1:26–27 In these final two verses of this section, James confronts false religion by exposing its corrupt fruit. James's diction is instructive. It is quite possible to “think” of oneself as “religious” while actually deceiving one's own heart as to its true spiritual state (v. 26). Modern evangelicals often avoid the word “religion” and its cognates when describing true Christianity. In the evangelical subculture, the word “religion” connotes institutionalized or cultic observances without reference to saving faith. Interestingly, the Greek words here rendered “religious” (*thrēskos*) and “religion” (*thrēskeia*) also connote “religious service . . . especially as expressed in a system of external observances.”¹² Outside of James 1:26–27, only the noun form (*thrēskeia*) occurs elsewhere in the NT (Acts 26:5; Col. 2:18). Perhaps James alludes to the neutral or potentially negative sense of the words *thrēskos* and *thrēskeia*—pointing out that the world views the external observances of religion differently than how God weighs such behavior. It is also important to note that the English word “religion” (and its cognates) did not carry such negative connotations in previous generations, nor does it currently in all Christian traditions.

James homes in on unbridled speech as a representative sign of false religion. A man may go through all the outward motions of religion (e.g., attending worship services, observing Christian sacraments, giving to the church), but if sinful patterns (e.g., gossip, coarse joking, spiteful words) characterize his speech, then his religion is exposed as an empty shell.

When James speaks of “visiting” orphans and widows, he refers to visiting for the purpose of providing for their needs (James 1:27). True religion cares for the needy, with orphans and widows being the two primary classes of needy persons in ancient society. In highlighting these representative classes, James does not mean to exclude other needy or marginalized members of society (e.g., refugees or disabled persons).

In addition to engaging in visible acts of material sacrifice (mirroring God's fatherly providential care), true religion also reflects God's holiness. A Christian is to keep himself “unstained from the world” (v. 27). The choice of language here

¹² Ibid., s.v. θρησκεία.

reminds us that we are surrounded by sin-tainted people and sin-tainted societal structures embodying an ongoing rebellion against God. The “world” (both people and structures) seeks to “squeeze us into its mold” (Rom. 12:2 PHILLIPS). Just as we seek to keep our clothes from being stained, so we should guard our hearts and minds from the moral filth of this world.

Response

One of the greatest challenges to the modern Christian church is nominalism. Even large and superficially vibrant churches have pews (or cushioned chairs) filled with persons aptly described as “hearers” of the Word but not “doers” (James 2:22). James appropriately rebukes many self-deceived “Christians” who give no evidence of belonging to Jesus other than the presence of their bodies at a church building two hours per week.

In studying texts like James 1:19–27, many churches are rediscovering the importance of regenerate church membership. They are becoming convinced that they should not add to the church rolls those who are unable to articulate the gospel or do not give evidence of Christian commitment in their daily lives. Along with regenerate membership comes the weighty but necessary task of church discipline. Persons who severely deviate (without repentance) from holy living or sound doctrine must be removed from the membership of the church in order to awaken them to the truth of their desperate spiritual state and to protect the external witness of the Christian community (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:11–13; Titus 2:8).

On an individual level, James 1:19–27 calls each one of us to reflection. What is my speech like? Do I listen to people? Am I wise and sparing in my words? Am I easily angered? Do I care for the downtrodden? Am I genuinely committed to personal holiness—and not just when others are looking? Stoical resolve will not remove sinful patterns. James tells us to repent from sin and trust in God’s implanted, Spirit-empowered Word to change us.

This passage also challenges our truncated views of Christianity. Some Christian traditions emphasize Bible study (“looking” at and “persevering” in the Word; v. 25) and personal holiness (“[keeping] oneself unstained from the world”; v. 27), while other Christian traditions emphasize social justice (“[visiting] orphans and widows in their affliction”; v. 27). A full-orbed biblical Christianity encompasses all of these dimensions and more, with Christ at the center as promised Messiah and sovereign Lord (1:1).

JAMES 2:1–13

2 My brothers,¹ show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. ²For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, ³and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, “You sit here in a good place,” while you say to the poor man, “You stand over there,” or, “Sit down at my feet,” ⁴have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? ⁷Are they not the ones who blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

⁸If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. ¹¹For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. ¹³For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*; also verses 5, 14

Section Overview

Keeping with the theme of consistent Christian living, James commands Christians not to show sinful partiality (James 2:1), specifically not favoring the rich while discriminating against the poor. James paints a vivid illustration of a rich man and a poor man visiting a Christian community, with a vast difference in the way in which they are received (vv. 2–4). James points out that a Christian congregation’s inhospitable response to a poor man would be contrary to God’s gracious and loving care for the poor (vv. 5–6a). Should not a poor man be honored by the community, since God has honored the poor?

James goes on to show the logical inconsistency of his readers’ favoring the rich (vv. 6b–7). Indeed, it is these wealthy outsiders who are oppressing and exploiting poor members of the Christian community. How foolish to fawn over one’s oppressors! Moreover, these wealthy outsiders even blaspheme the name of the Lord, and yet Christians continue to curry favor with them.

James completes his argument against sinful partiality by appealing to Scripture (vv. 8–13). The command to love one's neighbor requires Christians to love their poor neighbors. One may excuse partiality as an inconsequential infraction, but discrimination makes one a transgressor of God's holy law, alongside murderers and adulterers. Impartiality matters to God! Instead of showing judgmental partiality, Christians should show mercy—a mercy that mirrors what they themselves have received from God and that now allows them to walk in the gospel-empowered freedom of obedience.

Section Outline

- V. Warning against Sinful Partiality (2:1–13)
 - A. James's Command against Partiality (2:1)
 - B. Concrete Example of Economic Partiality (2:2–4)
 - C. God's View of the Poor (2:5–6a)
 - D. Inconsistency of Favoring the Wicked Rich (2:6b–7)
 - E. Scriptural Arguments for Impartial Love (2:8–13)

Comment

2:1 In calling his readers “my brothers,” James reminds them of the common bond they share in the family of faith, while also signaling a transition to another topic. James gives a command in verse 1, followed by an illustrative example (vv. 2–4) and supportive arguments (vv. 5–13). James commands those who trust in Jesus as Lord and Messiah not to cloud their faith with “partiality” (the Greek word is plural, possibly pointing to various discrete acts of favoritism). Partiality fails to treat all persons as equally made in the image of God. Instead, it takes a glance at someone's face (or status, or wealth, or ancestry, etc.) before deciding how to act. Favoritism is thus an expression either of fear (desiring to avoid retribution) or, more often, of greed or lust (toadying favor). Partiality sinfully discriminates against persons from whom one neither fears retribution nor seeks favors—or simply against persons whom one dislikes.

James 2:1 is the second of only two places in the letter explicitly mentioning the name “Jesus” (cf. 1:1). Skeptical commentators have taken this infrequency as evidence that James is merely a lightly edited collection of early Jewish moral exhortation. Such skepticism fails to take into account the many parallels with Jesus' teaching throughout the letter, as well as James's new covenant modifiers (e.g., “law of liberty”; 2:12) that regularly qualify traditional Jewish expressions.

Jesus is described here as “the Lord of glory,” perhaps to remind James's original audience that there is only one individual who deserves special honor—and it is not the rich visitor to their assembly! “Lord of glory” may also add emphasis and seriousness to the exhortation against partiality, acting as part of an *inclusio* (literary “bookends”) paired with the warning of coming judgment at the end of this passage (v. 13).

2:2–4 These verses provide a specific example of the kind of partiality James forbids in verse 1: favoring the rich and discriminating against the poor. Although the example is introduced for hypothetical consideration, James’s more direct confrontation of his readers later in this section (vv. 6–7) indicates his hypothetical example likely reflects actual cases of discrimination against poor Christians.

There are two main opinions concerning the background of the scene here. (1) Some commentators have suggested that James is describing the communal resolution of a judicial dispute between two members of the Christian community. Thus, the rich and poor would both be members of the Christian community, with sinful favoritism shown toward the rich in the adjudication of the disagreement. The explicit language of “judges” in verse 4 perhaps favors this interpretation. (2) More likely, James intends to describe outsiders (one rich, one poor) visiting a Christian gathering, and the unfortunate difference in hospitality shown to them. In support of this interpretation, we note that “the rich” are unambiguously outsiders in verses 6–7, and the labeling of Christian community members as “judges” is likely a metaphorical rebuke.

In memorable fashion, James lists the visible accoutrements of the rich man’s wealth (gold ring, fine clothing) rather than simply labeling him as “rich” (v. 2). The wording reminds us how partiality reacts to externals rather than to what is of real value. “Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7).

The word here translated “assembly” is *synagōgē* in Greek. *Ekklēsia* is the preferred NT word for the Christian assembly. *Synagōgē*, on the other hand, almost always refers to the Jewish synagogue within the NT (e.g., Matt. 4:23; Acts 22:19). James’s non-technical use of *synagōgē* to refer to a Christian gathering likely points to the early date of his letter.

In the hypothetical scene James describes, members of the Christian community are promptly attentive to the rich man. They “pay attention” to the well-dressed visitor, offering him a good place to sit (James 2:3a). This good seat apparently offers greater honor, access, and/or comfort. The poor man in “shabby clothing” (v. 2), on the other hand, is barely acknowledged. Instead, he is told to stand at a distance or to take a seat on the ground at the feet of his host (v. 3).¹³ In ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman society, hospitality toward strangers was treated with much greater seriousness than in our modern world. Moreover, being ordered to sit at the feet of one’s host would have been insulting.

After presenting his audience with a flagrant example of favoritism toward the rich, James condemns the behavior for what it is: “Have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (v. 4). The rhetorical question functionally makes two assertions: (1) When Christians treat the rich and poor differently, they exercise a sinful discrimination in their assembly. (2) Rather than being hosts or brothers or servants of their guests, they are behaving

¹³ The Greek of verse 3b is rendered more literally as “sit down by my footstool” (NASB), but the ESV captures the derogatory sense well.

like judges (a place reserved for God, who alone sees the heart; cf. 4:12). Not only are they judges, they are *wicked* judges, responding to external markers of the wealth of their guests. At root, their discriminatory behavior is nothing more than a greedy, self-centered attempt to enrich their own coffers or status through sycophancy. They are like corrupt judges who set themselves up for future undefined paybacks.

2:5–6a By employing the homiletical imperative “Listen” and the vocative “my beloved brothers,” James alerts his readers that he is transitioning to a series of arguments against partiality. The first argument is richly theological: God has “chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom.” In other words, because God honors the poor (and because the Christian assembly should align itself with God’s values), the Christian assembly should honor the poor also.

James is not advocating an extreme form of liberation theology in which the poor are guaranteed salvation simply because of their economic privation (and assumed oppression). Rather, in proverbial fashion, James affirms the Lord’s care and provision for the economically disadvantaged—a theme found throughout the Bible (e.g., Ex. 23:11; Ps. 12:5; Prov. 14:31; 19:17; Luke 4:18; 1 Cor. 1:26–27; Gal. 2:10). At the same time, poverty may be the result of blameworthy laziness (Prov. 20:13). Persons in desperate economic situations, however, are usually not suffering because of sloth, and when they call out to God in their distress, they show themselves to be “rich in faith” (James 2:5). They are people who “love” God and look to his promises; they long for his “kingdom” (v. 5). To such trust, the Lord responds with favor and ultimate deliverance (Hab. 2:4). In contrast, “riches do not profit in the day of wrath” (Prov. 11:4). Sadly, unlike God, who honors the poor, the Christians who discriminate against the poor dishonor them (James 2:6a).

2:6b–7 Verses 6b–7 present a logical argument against obsequious attention to the rich. James reminds his readers that the worldly rich are oppressing some of the members of their own community and are “[dragging them] into court.” Possibly these rich outsiders had made unscrupulous loans to members of the Christian community. If crops or sales failed, a rich lender could then employ his legal right to swoop in and seize a poor man’s land or property. The argument is shockingly pragmatic: why show favoritism to someone whose only concern is to exploit you? One is reminded of the way some modern Christians have fawned over celebrities or politicians only to discover later that the influential figures had no intention of redirecting their wealth and influence to genuinely Christian causes.

In verse 7, James again points out the inconsistency of giving special treatment to those who are opposed not merely to individual Christians but also to the “honorable name” (the Lord and his reputation). James says that these wicked non-Christian rich persons “blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called” (v. 7). To “be called by the name” of someone is to belong to him.¹⁴ The

¹⁴ BDAG, s.v. ἐπικαλέω.

Christians belong to the Lord, yet these rich outsiders were blaspheming the very one who owned them.

The reference to the “calling” of the Lord’s name may also allude to baptism, in which believers are baptized “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Within the NT, Trinitarian Christian baptism can also be referred to (in shorthand) as being baptized “in the name of [the Lord] Jesus” (e.g., Acts 8:16; 10:48; 19:5).

Were the rich outsiders literally pronouncing curses against Jesus, the Trinity, or some combination thereof? Possibly. Perhaps more likely, their continued rejection of Jesus and his saving work (and their continued unrepentant embrace of sin) could be labeled a culpable blasphemy of Jesus’ saving name (cf. Matt. 12:31). “Why would you fawn over persons blaspheming the Lord?” asks James.

2:8–13 In the final section of this passage, James makes a series of scriptural and theological arguments against partiality. James commends those who truly fulfill “the royal law according to the Scripture” by loving their neighbors as themselves (James 2:8). Several things are striking in this short verse. First, James again qualifies traditional Jewish categories with new covenant modifiers. He speaks not of “the law” but of “the royal law.” In other words, James refers to the law as interpreted and fulfilled by Jesus in his kingdom. In light of James’s language, it is noteworthy that Jesus quotes the double love command as summarizing all the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 22:37–40).

Second, we should note the explicit wording here; James refers to the royal law “according to the Scripture.” The explicitly quoted section of OT Scripture (Lev. 19:18) is distinguished from the larger unified kingdom law inaugurated by Jesus (i.e., “the royal law”). All old covenant commands are true for new covenant believers, but each injunction must be considered individually as to how it is fulfilled or explicated in the life and teaching of Jesus.

Third, James poignantly asserts that selectively to love the rich more than the poor is not to love one’s neighbor truly. To do so is to break an explicit command of God (Lev. 19:18)—a command embodying the ethics of the kingdom inaugurated by Jesus. A surprising portion of James’s teachings mirrors Leviticus 19, and some scholars have even suggested that it is instructive to think of portions of the letter as homiletical expositions of Leviticus 19.¹⁵

Showing partiality (James 2:9) is “committing sin” by not obeying an explicit command of God (i.e., loving one’s neighbor; Lev. 19:18). James leaves no room for doubt by naming partiality as a sin of commission—breaking an explicit command of God in Scripture, making those who do so “transgressors” (James 2:9).

Fallen humans have a tendency to excuse their sins as less significant than the sins of others, and James homes in on this error. In verse 10, speaking hypothetically, he points out that even if one kept the rest of God’s law yet violated just one

¹⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 123–135.

command, that person would “become guilty of all of [the law]” (v. 10). Many readers, both ancient and modern, may buck at this assertion. Come now, James! Really? How can you say that I am accountable for the entire law of God when we are talking about breaking just one command? James goes on to answer such an objection in verse 11. He says, “For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.” Strikingly, when James quotes the law, he does so in very personal terms. James does not say, “As it says in the second book of the Law . . .” Instead, James says, “For [God] who said . . . also said . . .” To break the law at any point is to rebel against the God who spoke that law (Ex. 20:1).

Why did James specify the commands against murder and adultery? One might have expected him to single out the command against coveting. Surely all persons have broken that command at some point, even if the majority of his audience had likely avoided murdering someone or engaging in a physical act of adultery. Yet let us not forget James’s main purpose in 2:11. He is attacking the idea that one can disobey a portion of the law while still avoiding a guilty verdict from God. Not possible, says James. His point is perhaps made more striking by his choice of two commands dealing with “big sins” (from the perspective of fallen humans). Think how foolish it would be for someone to object, “I did not commit adultery—I merely murdered someone. What’s the big deal?” James implies that the objection “I merely gave the rich guy a better seat” will be met with equal incredulity in the courts of heaven.

In light of James’s later assertion that we all stumble in many ways (3:2), his strong words in 2:10–11 condemn every reader of his letter as a transgressor of God’s law. Apart from the mercy of God—in which we receive not the judgment we deserve but instead God’s kindness and forgiveness in Christ—no reader of this letter could stand before God’s holy judgment seat.

The good news is that we are not left to wallow in our transgressions and condemnation. Instead, as we experience God’s mercy in Christ, we are forgiven and can live free from both the penalty and the power of sin. Along these lines, in verse 12 James commands, “So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.” We could paraphrase this verse: “As you face the temptation to show favoritism, remember the judgment, and act like people whom Christ has freed to show genuine love” (cf. 1 Cor. 3:13–15). We note that James employs traditional Jewish categories (“law”) but again applies new covenant modifiers (“of liberty”), indicating the fulfillment of redemptive history in Christ that underlies James’s commands.

James ends this section (2:1–13) with a word of warning and a word of grace. The warning is stark: “Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy” (v. 13a). Regarding partiality, there is no room among the Christian community for hypocrites who live in hatred rather than love. Instead, in light of the mercy that we, as justly condemned transgressors, have received in Jesus, we must extend mercy to others if we ourselves expect to continue receiving mercy from

Christ. James's language mirrors the stern warning of the master at the end of Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant:

Then his master summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. (Matt. 18:32–35)

The closing word of grace is similarly terse: "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13b). This proverbial statement is certainly true in the individual Christian's relationship with God. While a Christian deserves judgment for his transgressions, God's mercy has victoriously brought that person to repentance and saving faith (Ps. 51:1). God's undeserved mercy has triumphed over the deserved judgment. Likewise, Christians saved by this mercy are now called to extend it graciously to others—being salt and light in a dark world, with winsome mercy overpowering the judgmental ways of the world. On the last day, such visible acts of mercy will serve as evidence of the saving work of Christ in our lives (cf. Matt. 25:34–40).

Response

I once spoke with some Chinese Christians about how some American churches raise money in building campaigns. The Chinese believers were incredulous to discover that some churches invite wealthier members to elaborate dinners and give them thank-you gifts for their generous donations. "Doesn't that disobey James 2?" their quizzical faces seemed to ask. We might respond, "The churches are just strategically presenting needs to those who have the ability to help." Is this, in fact, the case? Or do we sometimes cross over the line of treating the wealthy as more valuable than others to the church's mission? James's warnings should cause us to be diligent in not showing favoritism to the rich.

James's warning against partiality toward the wealthy requires little historical or contextual accommodation: the command is immediately applicable. Just as James cautioned against treating rich and poor visitors differently, so modern churches should ask themselves if they are really welcoming every person as if that visitor were Christ. The Lord Jesus reminds us that when we care for the poor, downtrodden, or oppressed Christian brother or sister, it is the same as if we were caring for him. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the king says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Matt. 25:35–36).

James focuses on the sin of economic partiality, but there are many kinds of sinful partiality. Persons discriminate against others based on external appearance, gender, attire, social status, music preference, age, nationality, and many other factors. When we exercise sinful partiality, knowingly or unknowingly, we fail to

love our neighbors as ourselves. Pray for God’s wisdom to see where you and your church are failing to love your neighbors. Then repent. Trust in the mercy of Christ to cover your sin. Extend his love and mercy, without partiality, to all.

JAMES 2:14–26

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good¹ is that? ¹⁷So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

¹⁸But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! ²⁰Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; ²³and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. ²⁴You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? ²⁶For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

¹ Or *benefit*

Section Overview

James 2:14–26 is perhaps the most well-known portion of the letter. The section aptly summarizes one of the letter’s main themes—the necessity of deeds as evidence for true faith—doing so with striking language and memorable illustrations. The popularity of this section is due primarily to its famous critic, Martin Luther. Luther called James “a right strawy epistle,”¹⁶ and, as noted, although he left the letter in the canon of his German Bible, he moved it to the end of the NT. Luther provocatively asserted,

Many have mightily labored to reconcile James and Paul, just as Philip [Melanchthon] has done in the Apology [to the Augsburg Confession] but

¹⁶ Cited by Timo Laato, “Justification according to James: A Comparison with Paul,” *TJ* 18/1 (Spring 1997): 43. The German article was translated into English by Mark A. Seifrid. I cannot recommend Laato’s article highly enough.

not with real success. These are at odds: faith justifies [Rom. 3:28], faith does not justify [James 2:24]. If there is anyone who can bring these into harmony with one another, I will set my biretta [a type of hat] on him, and let him scold me as a fool.¹⁷

James 2:14–26 is organized as an *inclusio*, with clear assertions of the uselessness (v. 14) or lifelessness (v. 26) of faith without works appearing at the beginning and end of the discourse. Following his opening salvo (v. 14), James goes on to illustrate workless faith with the hypothetical example of a callous member of the Christian community who addresses a needy person with empty words rather than helpful deeds (vv. 15–17). Employing a diatribe style, James answers an interlocutor's objection that perhaps one person can have faith while another person has deeds (as discrete and sufficient gifts). James adduces two examples from the OT (Abraham and Rahab) to illustrate the point that genuine faith always produces righteous deeds (vv. 21–25).

Section Outline

- VI. Faith and Works (2:14–26)
 - A. Faith without Works Is Useless (2:14)
 - B. Illustration of Useless Faith (2:15–17)
 - C. Correcting an Interlocutor (2:18–20)
 - D. The Example of Abraham (2:21–24)
 - E. The Example of Rahab (2:25)
 - F. Faith without Works Is Dead (2:26)

Comment

2:14 James signals the beginning of a new section with a vocative (“my brothers”) and two piercing questions (“What good is it . . . if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?”). These questions function rhetorically as strong and memorable denials. They are akin to the declarative statements, “To say you have faith but not works is of no benefit. That kind of faith cannot save anyone.”

Readers should pay careful attention to the exact wording. James does not say that the person in question indeed has faith but not works. Instead, the person “says” he has faith (a deceived self-declaration). Furthermore, the ESV has rightly translated the sense of the article that appears in front of the word *pistis* (“faith”) in Greek. The question is not, “Shall faith be able to save him?” (so the Douay-Rheims translation),¹⁸ but rather, “Can *that* faith save him?” (ESV). The faith under discussion is not genuine saving faith but the inadequate self-declared faith from the first half of verse 14.

2:15–17 James next provides an illustration of the self-declared, inadequate, non-saving faith introduced in verse 14. The Greek language has several ways of intro-

¹⁷ Cited by Timo Laato, *ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸ American edition of 1899.

ducing conditional sentences, and by the use of *ean* (“if”) in verse 15, James signals to his readers that he is describing a situation for hypothetical consideration (like the English introduction, “Let us imagine . . .”).

Despite James’s frequent generic use of *adelphos* (“brother”), *anthrōpos* “man,” and even *anēr* (normally “male,” but see 1:8), here he unexpectedly mentions both genders explicitly (“a brother or sister”; 2:15). Perhaps respecting the stricter segregation of the sexes of his ancient culture, James describes vividly a need that should be met with equal alacrity by both male and female readers.

Analogous to James’s vivid description of the rich man’s appearance (2:2), here he identifies the poor Christian brother or sister by his or her inadequate clothing and need for daily sustenance. The Greek word translated in 2:15 as “poorly clothed” is *gymnos*, which usually means “naked” but can also refer to the sparse coverings of the destitute (e.g., Matt. 25:36; LXX Job 31:19; Tob. 1:17).

In verse 16, James continues to develop the plot of this hypothetical mini-drama: “[Imagine] . . . one of you says to them . . .” James here skillfully weaves in a member of the ancient Christian community he is addressing. From a distance, this imagined interchange between the Christian of average means and the poor Christian seems warm and religiously appropriate. It recalls the spiritual greetings of the OT saints (e.g., Ruth 2:4). Certainly it is not wrong to wish someone the Lord’s blessing of peace or to wish for the Lord to provide him with the clothing, food, and shelter he needs (note the divine passive construction).¹⁹

But it *is* wrong, says James, to wish such blessings upon people when you yourself are able to help meet those material needs but do nothing beyond wagging your tongue in their direction. James speaks of “things needed for the body” (James 2:16), which reminds us that all humans have both a spirit/soul and a body. Humans have basic bodily needs (food, clothing, shelter), and a fundamental test of love is whether we give of our resources to help those in desperate need—especially a “brother or sister” (v. 15). The rhetorical question, “What good is that?” (v. 16b), repeats the exact Greek words that began verse 14 and makes unmistakably clear that this sad story is a visible example of empty, useless, non-saving faith.

James summarizes starkly in verse 17: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” It is important to note that the formula is not “faith + works = salvation.” James does not say that works need to be added to faith in order for one to be saved. Instead, his explicit language is that faith either “has” or “does not have” works (v. 17). Faith is inherently either dead or alive. If it is alive, it contains works organically in itself and thus overflows with them in the visible world. The alternative is a dead faith that does not contain such works. James’s contrast is between living and dead faith, not between a living faith that has works and a living faith that does not have works. Faith is like a seed. If a living seed is planted, it will produce a living plant. If a dead seed is planted, it will produce nothing.

¹⁹ “Divine passive” refers to use of the passive voice with the implied subject being God (in this verse, “be warmed and filled [by God]”).

2:18–20 In lively homiletic style, James introduces a potential objection in verse 18: “But someone will say, . . .” An interchange between an imaginary interlocutor and an author/speaker is called a *diatribe*. The diatribe style was common in ancient Greco-Roman rhetoric and is found also in Paul’s writings (e.g., Rom. 9:19). The interlocutor objects, “You have faith and I have works.” In this objection, the pronouns “you” and “I” are employed nonspecifically—i.e., as equivalent to “one person” or “another person.” In other words, the objector raises the question of whether “faith” and “works” are not just two separate, equally valid gifts. We might paraphrase his objection, “Why are you insisting that everyone has to be the same? Some people have faith; others have works!”

James’s verbal riposte skewers his opponent’s flawed perspective. He writes, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works” (James 2:18). How can a dead faith with no works be demonstrated? A self-deceived declaration of having faith (v. 14) is certainly not admissible evidence!

The explicit language of “show” (Gk. *deiknymi*), used twice in verse 18b, again highlights that works are not being added to faith. Genuine saving faith “has” (Gk. *echō*; v. 17) works, and if such works are present, they will “show up” to be observed by others. Genuine saving faith is demonstrable through outward behavior. One is reminded of Jesus’ warning against false prophets:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (Matt. 7:15–20)

Although some scholars attempt to pit James and Paul against one another, in Galatians Paul presents a similar formula for genuine faith. Saving faith inevitably produces the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22–23). That is to say, genuine faith organically bears such fruit produced by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of those who have trusted in Christ for salvation. Likewise in Galatians, Paul says, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only *faith working through love*” (Gal. 5:6). “Faith working through love” seems to be a Pauline equivalent to James’s idea of “faith having works” (James 2:14).

In 2:19, James continues to respond to his self-deceived opponent. James writes, “You believe that God is one.” “God is one” is a literal translation of the famous Jewish confession known as the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4), which should likely be understood as an affirmation of monotheism. The fact that James chooses this well-known Jewish statement of faith is further evidence that the Christian congregation to which James writes is made up largely of persons of Jewish ethnicity (cf. James 1:1).

Regarding the interlocutor’s affirmation of the *Shema*, James responds, “You do well.” This short statement could be understood as positive (i.e., “Yes, you are

right in saying that much.”) or as sarcastic (“Oh, impressive!”). Given James’s clear agreement with the theology of the *Shema*, it is more likely that his words should be taken as positive before his thought turns sharply in the latter part of the verse.

After building middle ground with his opponent regarding the confession of the *Shema*, James adds, “Even the demons believe—and shudder!” Even though James approves of the confession of the *Shema*, he attacks the interlocutor’s mere intellectual affirmation of monotheism. We might paraphrase, “Yes, you are right to affirm monotheism—but do you realize that even the demons intellectually affirm monotheism? And they demonstrate a more rational response to their confession than you do; at least they shudder in fear of their coming judgment!”

It is important to pay careful attention to the actual words James uses. James says the demons “believe” (*pisteuō*; v. 19). Clearly, such belief is not saving faith; it is inadequate, non-saving, useless, dead faith. The demons do not need merely to add works to their faith to be saved. They need a completely different kind of faith—a living, saving, faith that “has works” inherently in it.

James continues his diatribe with a frontal attack on the interlocutor. “Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless?” (v. 20). In asking this question, James sets himself up to demonstrate his thesis further by way of appeal to Scripture in the following verses (vv. 21–25). It is worth noting that James addresses an *imaginary* opponent as “you foolish person,” whereas he consistently addresses the church as “brothers”—even when he has strong words for them.

2:21–24 James offers two Scriptural examples, Abraham and Rahab, to show that a faith without works is useless and non-salvific. Abraham, as the father of the Jewish faith, is an understandable example, but why the prostitute Rahab? Perhaps James deliberately chooses both a male and a female example—and, though Rahab was a prostitute, she appears as a converted heroine in the biblical narrative (Josh. 2:1–24; Heb. 11:31). Furthermore, Rahab was revered as an ancestor of King David (Matt. 1:5) and a preeminent example of a proselyte (Josh. 6:17–23).

Abraham is described as “our father”—as he is of all Christians (Rom. 4:16)—but if James is writing to ethnically Jewish Christians, then this was true of them both spiritually and physically (cf. James 1:1 and 2:19).

James asks a rhetorical question in 2:21: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?” James indicates that the answer to this question is yes—both by the Greek construction he employs (rhetorical question with *ouk*) as well as by the following verse.

The language “justified by works” likely jars the modern reader, as it seems to contradict Paul’s explicit language in Romans 4:2 (“If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God”). Note, however, how James goes on in 2:22–23 to explain what “justification by works” means for him.

James clarifies, “You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham

believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’—and he was called a friend of God” (vv. 22–23). Abraham’s prior exercise of saving faith had set him in the right with God. His faith was reckoned as “righteousness,” and he was in relationship with God as God’s “friend” (v. 23).²⁰ Yet such faith, while living and salvific, was invisible until it showed itself in the works that it inherently contained.

James offers several different ways of describing the way these visible works emerged from this invisible faith to show/demonstrate/vindicate/justify Abraham. His faith was “active along with his works,” or literally, “faith was co-laboring with his works” (v. 22). James then describes faith as being “completed” by Abraham’s works (v. 22). Finally, James depicts Abraham’s offering his son on the altar as a fulfillment of Scripture (v. 23). Co-laboring; completing; fulfilling. This is not the language of external addition; it is organic language intended to convey the truth that Abraham’s visible obedience emerged from his invisible saving faith and demonstrated said faith in the visible realm. As such, he was “justified”—shown to be righteous by a living faith that led inexorably to obedience (v. 24).

2:25 James offers a second Scriptural example of genuine faith that shows itself in works: Rahab the prostitute.²¹ James’s recipients were likely ethnically Jewish (cf. comment on 2:21–24) and would have been familiar with this OT heroine from the town of Jericho (cf. Josh. 2:1–24; 6:16–25). James employs the example of Rahab to continue instructing his “foolish” interlocutor that “faith apart from works is useless” (James 2:20). In other words, Rahab did not have merely a nominal faith (i.e., affirming the God of Israel as the true, righteous, and all-powerful Judge of all nations; Josh. 2:9–11); she acted on that belief (Josh. 2:15–21). She sheltered the messengers of the true God when they were in danger (Josh. 2:4–8). Had Rahab failed to act, her so-called faith would have been demonstrated as useless and dead.

2:26 James signals the end of this epistolary unit by offering an illustration from daily life that restates his initial point concerning the uselessness of work-less faith (v. 14). He writes, “As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (v. 26). James acknowledges there is a kind of “faith” that does not produce deeds, but it is a “dead” faith, not a living, true, or salvific one. Jesus, likewise, in the parable of the sower describes a temporary, false, and non-salvific faith unmasked by the passing of time. In describing the seed sown on rocky ground, Jesus indicates that it represents those “who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. And they have no root in themselves, but endure

²⁰ Though no OT verse explicitly calls Abraham God’s “friend,” the title accurately captures the gracious and personal relationship Abraham shared with God—and there was a long post-OT tradition of referring to Abraham in this way.

²¹ Concerning Rahab’s seemingly ever-present identification as “the prostitute,” A. T. Robertson comments, “Her vicious life she left behind, but the name clung to her always” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, [Nashville, Broadman, 1990], s.v.).

for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away” (Mark 4:16–17).

Response

I once heard a pastor describe how he had been “saved” at a young age but had continued to live a worldly life. He labeled this experience as “coming to know Jesus as Savior.” The pastor said that at a later date he had “come to know Jesus as Lord.” He spoke of the changes in his life that Jesus had made as Lord, reordering his priorities and calling him to obedience.

This pastor had an apparently sincere desire to call other people to discipleship, but unwittingly he was teaching false doctrine. He implied that it is possible to have genuine saving faith with no works or fruit in one’s life. He implicitly encouraged nominal Christians (i.e., “Christians in name only”) still under God’s wrath to rely on the distant memory of the time they “walked the aisle” or “prayed the prayer,” followed by years of unrepentant sin and cold hearts.

Do not be mistaken; works do not save a Christian! Jesus Christ saves us through his perfect life and atoning death. To receive the free gift of salvation, we must be regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As God’s adopted sons and daughters, we experience conviction for sin and the loving guidance and discipline of our heavenly Father. In his teaching, Jesus left no room for “unrepentant faith” or “saved nondisciples.” Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt. 16:24–25).

As numerous scholars have noted, “Faith alone saves, but faith that saves is never alone but is accompanied by living deeds.”²² Another scholar has said, “Faith is the root, and deeds are the fruit.”²³ Even though Martin Luther criticized James, his own words capture poignantly James’s message:

It is a living, busy active mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good things incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done this, and is constantly doing them. Whoever does not do such works, however, is an unbeliever. He gropes and looks around for faith and good works, but knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Yet he talks and talks, with many words, about faith and good works.²⁴

In hearing the admonition to care for the poor (James 2:14–26), a modern reader may be overwhelmed by the scores of needs encountered daily on the television or Internet. Modern technology brings limitless needs to our doorsteps (or screens) twenty-four hours a day. With limited resources and limited

²² Many scholars affirm a similar formula, though perhaps John Calvin was the first to do so, in “Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote” (<http://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/42366/is-luther-really-the-originator-of-we-are-saved-by-faith-alone-but-the-faith-t>).

²³ Tom Schreiner, personal conversation.

²⁴ From the preface to Luther’s commentary on Romans, cited by Moo, *Letter of James*, 144.

knowledge, it can be difficult to know where to begin. A practical suggestion is to begin with the ministries of the local church. Perhaps there is a prison ministry or homeless ministry we have seen advertised for years but never really looked into. Perhaps thoughtful leaders or laymen at our churches have established connections with ministries that are wise and efficient in addressing the needs of the international poor.²⁵

Another place to begin caring for the needy is in our own neighborhoods and circles of relationships. Even if we do not see external signs of economic poverty in our neighborhoods, there is plenty of relational and spiritual poverty. Is there a widow in the neighborhood who needs to have her leaves raked? Does a single mother at our children's school need someone to watch her daughter until she gets home from work? Rather than being paralyzed by the unlimited needs in the world, let us ask God for eyes to see the specific needs he has placed before us. Then, we must step forward in joyful faith, knowing we "are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

JAMES 3:1–12

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. ⁴Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life,¹ and set on fire by hell.² ⁷For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind,⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers,³ these things ought not to be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? ¹²Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water.

¹Or wheel of birth ²Greek Gehenna ³Or brothers and sisters; also verse 12

25 Cf. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself* (Chicago: Moody, 2012).

Section Overview

In the previous epistolary section (2:14–26), James taught that genuine saving faith demonstrates itself through deeds. Now in 3:1–12 he examines speech as another external indicator of one's inner spiritual condition. James here presents a pessimistic (yet realistic) appraisal of the wickedness often found in human communication.

The focus of 3:1–12 is the power and potential harm of human speech. The discourse unit can be broken into four subsections. James begins by warning of carelessly taking upon oneself the role of teacher in the church. Because we all sin with our words, if a teacher (who, by the nature of his office, speaks a great deal) is not spiritually mature, he will cause great harm to others. Second, James addresses the congregation more generally, warning of the power and potential harm of words with numerous striking illustrations (bits in horses' mouths, rudders on ships, a fire in a forest, the taming of wild animals). Third, James homes in on one sin of human speech: slander, i.e., the hypocrisy of blessing God while cursing humans made in his image. Fourth, James closes the section with several memorable images critiquing hypocritical slander (a spring that pours forth both fresh and salt water, a fig tree that bears olives, a grapevine that produces figs, a salt pond that yields fresh water).

Section Outline

- VII. The Powerful and Dangerous Tongue (3:1–12)
 - A. The Teacher's Tongue and Judgment (3:1–2)
 - B. Illustrations of the Tongue's Power and Potential for Harm (3:3–8)
 - C. The Hypocritical Slanderous Tongue (3:9–10)
 - D. Closing Illustrations against Hypocritical Slander (3:11–12)

Comment

3:1–2 James indicates his shift to another discourse unit by a change in topic and by the use of the vocative (“my brothers”; v. 1). In the previous section of the letter (2:14–26), James attacked a non-salvific faith that did not produce visible deeds. In 3:1 he shifts to focusing on speech, beginning more narrowly by addressing the speech of one group—teachers.

“Not many of you should become teachers” (v. 1), James warns. He is not cautioning against teaching generally; he is concerned with people recklessly taking up the teacher's mantle in the church. He goes on to explain, “For you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” James here speaks in the first person plural (“we”), putting himself under the same standards he applies to his readers—another example of his winsome humility.

Why are Christian teachers judged with greater strictness than ordinary believers are? In verse 2, James offers an explanatory comment: “For we all stumble in many ways.” He then goes on to discuss one type of stumbling: false speech. Because we all stumble in many ways, especially in speech (and it is through speech

that a teacher primarily influences others), a doctrinally or morally flawed teacher could lead many others into error.²⁶ Similarly, Jesus warns of severe judgment for those who influence others toward wickedness: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matt. 18:6).

James writes, “If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle his whole body” (James 3:2). Because the tongue reveals the heart (Mark 7:20–23), if one were truly able never to sin in speech, he would be a “perfect man.” Such a person could, James tells us, also resist the temptation of non-speech-related sins (e.g., lust, theft, idolatry, anger, greed). The language of “perfection” here mirrors James 1:4. As in the earlier passage, it is best to see the Christian as growing toward such perfection (or maturity) while never fully reaching it in this life. Only one human was completely sinless in speech on this earth: Jesus Christ, who was without fault in every other area of temptation as well. Thank God that the righteousness of Jesus is credited to us by faith when we repent of our sins and believe in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

3:3–8 Describing the hypothetical perfect man as “bridling” (*chalinagōgēsai*) his whole body (v. 2) perhaps reminds James of an actual bit (*chalinós*) and bridle, the first image he employs in a series of illustrations (v. 3). James’s main purpose in this section (vv. 3–8) is to appeal to the emotions and imaginations of his readers as he warns them of the destructive power of human speech. A small bit’s ability to guide a large horse (v. 3) teaches us that small things (e.g., the tongue) can have great effects. Just as the bit controls the whole horse, so also godly speech can positively influence a believer’s entire life. Godly speech not only evidences but also contributes to a life that honors God. Wicked speech, on the other hand, leads to more rebellion, sin, and dishonor. James’s language is reminiscent of the many biblical proverbs that address speech (e.g., Prov. 18:21).

In 3:4, James shifts to a nautical image to restate his point. Though ships are large, they are guided by a tiny rudder. Here again the main point of comparison is how a small thing (the tongue) can have large effects. Ships are described by James as “driven by strong winds,” emphasizing their size and the power necessary to move them. And yet, they can be steered by a tiny rudder wherever “the will of the pilot” desires.

Verse 5a draws a conclusion from the illustrations of the bit and the rudder: “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.” James indicates that we should not focus too much on the specific details of the prior illustrations; the main point of comparison is that a small thing (the tongue) can have large effects. Does the choice of the word “boasts” (*auchēi*) cast a dark shadow on the “great things” the tongue can claim? The verb *auchēō* occurs only here in the Greek NT and LXX. From extrabiblical usage, we discover the word can at times have a positive or

²⁶ Robertson aptly observes, “The teacher uses his tongue constantly and so is in particular peril on this score” (*Word Pictures*, s.v).

neutral connotation,²⁷ but given the generally negative tone of this passage, we are probably right to detect a hint of the tongue's evil bent in James's choice of *auchēō*. How wicked is the tongue, that it can sinfully vaunt its own destructive power!

James introduces a third image in verse 5b, that of a great forest fire kindled by a tiny spark. With an ongoing litany of images, James vies for the emotions and imaginations of his readers. The observation that a tiny thing (spark) can have a huge effect (forest fire) is the main point. Yet the image of a conflagration suggests out-of-control destructive power. The tongue is not merely powerful; it is injuriously and uncontrollably powerful.

Further supporting our understanding of the fire as a negative image of destructive power, James adds, "And the tongue is a fire" (v. 6a), with subsequent negative descriptions of this fire and its origin. The tongue is not only a fire but is "a world of unrighteousness" (v. 6). This phrase is unusual. In light of the latter part of the verse, which asserts that the tongue is "set on fire by hell" (v. 6b), we should probably understand the reference to "the world of unrighteousness" as James's metaphorical assertion that all of the various dimensions of sinfulness we find in this rebellious world (all of which deserve the judgment of hell) find expression in the human tongue. Every sinful human tongue is a mini-drama that, if observed long enough, expresses the countless unrighteous stories lived out in this fallen world.

James has a realistic pessimism concerning the influence of the tongue on one's life course and the ultimate origin of sinful human speech. In verse 6b, he speaks of the tongue as one of the "members" (parts) of the human person that stains the whole body. The language of "stain" here implies the guilt and shame brought upon the person who speaks wickedly. The reference to the "whole body" again emphasizes how sin cannot be limited to one part of the human person. Sinful speech will lead to countless other wicked actions, staining the human person with guilt, regret, and even physical malady. A person's own wicked words will "eat them alive."

The tongue's sinful contagion is further described by James as "setting on fire the entire course of life" (v. 6b). One need only read the daily news to see many examples of how one lie or flirtatious remark eventually can lead to adultery, deceit, murder, betrayal, hatred, or imprisonment. Attempting to limit the effects of one's sinful speech is like trying to stop a wildfire from spreading.

As a capstone to the fire imagery, James adds that the tongue is "set on fire by hell" (6b). The actual Greek word translated here as "hell" is *geenna*, frequently transliterated as *Gehenna*, which is itself a transliteration of a Hebraic phrase meaning "Valley of Hinnom." The term was used by Jesus to refer to the place of ultimate punishment for the wicked, including Satan and his demons (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33; Luke 12:5). In speaking of the tongue as "set on fire by hell" (James 3:6b), James asserts that the destructive power of the tongue comes from that great agent of destruction, Satan himself.

James closes this first staccato series of images (vv. 3–8) in this section on the tongue (vv. 1–12) by comparing the subduing of the tongue to the taming

²⁷ Cf. BDAG, s.v. αὐχέω.

of animals—illustrating the intractable nature of human speech (vv. 7–8). In hyperbolic fashion James notes, “Every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind” (v. 7). Here we find the typical Jewish division of animals into four classes, mirroring OT language (Gen. 1:20–21, 24–25). But, in contrast to effective human mastery of lower creatures, man is incapable of taming the tongue in his own mouth (James 3:8).

The ESV renders the text of verse 8a quite literally: “No human being can tame the tongue.” Augustine, among other interpreters, suggests that the explicit language of “no human being” (Gk. *oudeis* . . . *anthrōpōn*) leaves open the hope that God himself can tame the tongue.²⁸ While such an observation is true, James’s focus is on the sinful nature of every human tongue. James warns against the danger and destructiveness of human speech so that his readers will guard their words more carefully, even as they fail to tame their tongues completely and continue to “stumble in many ways” (v. 2).

Mirroring the language of the Psalms (Pss. 5:9; 12:2; 140:3), James labels the fallen human tongue for what it really is: “a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:8; cf. Rom. 3:13). True perfection in speech awaits the renewal of all things in the new heaven and earth. For now, believers stumble, repent, trust the righteousness of Christ, and see glimmers of the new age shining through their imperfect speech.

3:9–10 Verse 9 begins with the instrumental prepositional phrase “with it” (*en autē*)—a reminder that the human tongue is a tool. James employs the first person plural (“we”), inviting his audience (and himself) to admit that his indictment is a sad but true description of their own speech. James observes that “we bless our Lord and Father” (v. 9) with our tongue. The Greek verb translated “bless” (*eulogeō*) when directed toward God indicates an expression of praise. The object of this praise is “our Lord and Father.” The words “Lord” and “Father” are governed by one article in the Greek text and thus likely refer to the same person. James is not, then, referring to two persons of the triune God—the Lord Jesus and God the Father. James likely uses two titles to emphasize God’s rightful authority (Lord) as well as his loving self-revelation as Father of his people. In using the word *eulogeō* (“bless”), James may envision personal or corporate worship in which Christians praise God in prayer or song (cf. Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

In parallel style, James observes that “with it” (the tongue), we also “curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9). In employing the Greek verb *kataraomai* (here translated “curse”), James probably has in mind a variety of verbal sins that harm our neighbors—slander, false testimony, gossip, etc. Whatever casuistry or euphemism we might use to soften the reality of our sinful words (“Sorry, I’m just venting . . .”), James accurately indicts sinful speech for what it really is: cursing. In truth, we wish the harm of others, and our ill speech expresses that foul desire and works to accomplish it.

²⁸ Augustine, *On Nature and Grace* 15, cited in Moo, *Letter of James*, 161n19.

James says that to praise God and then curse humans made in his likeness is hypocrisy. Even a wicked person, who has perhaps cursed or harmed us, is still a broken portrait of God's image. The language of God's "likeness" (Gk. *homoiōsis*) or "image" alludes to Genesis 1:27, where humans, unlike other living creatures, are made in God's image. Scholars debate what such "image" language asserts specifically about humans, but all agree that it refers to a unique way in which humans reflect their Creator. In Genesis 1, human dominion over the rest of creation (reflecting the Creator's lordship) is highlighted as an expression of God's image (Gen. 1:28–30), even though dominion does not exhaust the term.

Even at their worst, humans maintain a dignity that comes from being created in God's image. This reality should restrain our speech and defer judgment to the Creator. Indeed, our speech should reflect God's providential and fatherly care of his creation, over which "he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Or, as Jesus warned, "Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell [Gk. *geenna*] of fire" (Matt. 5:22).

In verse 10 James states both his closing indictment ("from the same mouth come blessing and cursing") and his application ("these things ought not to be"). Sandwiched between these two statements is the vocative address "my brothers," reminding James's audience that although he addresses them as a teacher, they all share a filial status in the kingdom, and the teaching he presents is applicable to himself as well.

3:11–12 James closes this section on the tongue (vv. 1–12) with four word pictures illustrating the inconsistency of a tongue that both praises God (v. 9a) and curses people made in his image (v. 9b). In employing these images, James leaves his readers with a vivid indictment of hypocritical, slanderous speech and a clear call to live in accord with the supernatural work God is doing and has done in them.

In verse 11, James asks the rhetorical question, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?" If such a spring did exist, it would be signally undesirable, for the fresh drinking water would be tainted by the presence of brackish liquid. The application is obvious: should a Christian's mouth pour forth both blessing and cursing? Absolutely not!

In verse 12, using rhetorical questions, James asserts the obvious: fig trees bear figs (not olives), grapevines bear grapes (not figs), and salt ponds bear salt water (not fresh). The metaphor's application is clear. Christians regenerated by God through his Word (1:18, 21) should bear fruit in keeping with their new status, consistently speaking good, kind, and true words toward both God and man.

Response

"No human being can tame the tongue" (3:8). If we think James is exaggerating, we should attempt to be sinless in our speech for one day. It is nearly impossible. Ironically, even as I am writing these words in the silent stacks of a seminary

library (hidden away in a carrel with a closed door), I hear a library worker giving someone a tour and making an apparently untoward remark about “the faculty” in hushed tones! Ah, how desperately wicked and uncontrollable is the tongue.

Dallas Willard, the late scholar of Christian spirituality, once pledged for an entire year, every time he became aware that he was shading the truth or exaggerating, to pause and admit, “I lied to you.” Wow! An immediate and humble repentance of that sort would certainly provide ripe ground for the sanctifying and empowering work of the Spirit.

It is interesting that the numerous indictments of sinful speech are not matched by a litany of positive commands to speak true, right, and good things. In fact, James’s positive commands are subtler and come implicitly in the final closing illustrations from nature (vv. 11–12). Through rhetorical questions, James calls on his readers to live in accordance with the new nature and status God has given them. The NT scholar Rudolf Bultmann pointed out that Pauline ethics could be summarized as, “Be who you are.”²⁹ In other words, because God has declared us by grace to be his righteous sons and daughters, we are now called to behave in accord with that status. James, with varying terminology, calls for the same consistency.

Is it possible that sinful speech patterns have become so ingrained in our lives that we no longer notice them? Have calluses developed on our hearts from our corrupt speech patterns? Let us ask God to convict us of our sins of speech. Let us invite others in our lives to hold us accountable. What good news it is that Jesus died on the cross for all of our sins of speech! God the Father welcomes even our tongues into eternity because of the sinless speech of his Son. God chose to regenerate us (1:18) by implanting his saving Word inside us (1:21), and now he is calling us both to act and to speak as his holy people.

JAMES 3:13–18

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

²⁹ Cf. Michael Parsons’s discussion of Bultmann’s understanding of Pauline ethics in “Being Precedes Act: Indicative and Imperative in Paul’s Writing,” *EvQ* 88/2 (1988): 103.

Section Overview

In James 3:13–18, the writer describes true and false wisdom. As with other discourse units in the letter, it is somewhat difficult to discern a close literary relationship between this unit and the surrounding sections. Yet undoubtedly we see here another example of the letter’s motif of Christian consistency and wholeness, calling for Christians’ external behavior (works, speech, relationships, etc.) to match their professed submission to God. It is possible that, just as some community members were apparently taking the mantle of “teacher” upon themselves recklessly (3:1), so were others (or the same people) setting themselves up as “wise” or “understanding” (3:13). Such believers needed to be reminded of the true nature and fruits of wisdom. James has already taught that God grants wisdom to those who petition him in believing prayer (1:5–8), and here he goes into more detail concerning the origin and expressions of wisdom.

Section Outline

- VIII. True and False Wisdom (3:13–18)
 - A. True Wisdom Demonstrated by Actions (3:13)
 - B. The Nature and Fruit of False Wisdom (3:14–16)
 - C. The Nature and Fruit of True Wisdom (3:17–18)

Comment

3:13 James begins this new discourse unit with a question: “Who is wise and understanding among you?” The question serves as a verbal trap, because as soon as anyone raises his hand, James slaps it down: “Wisdom is not shown through vaunting self-endorsement,” James retorts. Rather, the truly wise person demonstrates his wisdom through his “good conduct” (referring to his pattern of life; v. 13). As modern Westerners, we have a tendency to think of “wisdom” as esoteric erudition, but true wisdom is grounded in the “fear of the Lord” (Prov. 1:7; 9:10). When one stands in proper awe and respect (fear) of God, the result is “meekness” (James 3:13), recognizing one’s proper place in the created order and submitting to the Creator’s instructions in daily life. Any claim to wisdom is tested by the life and demeanor of the supposed wise person.

3:14–16 There are two implied phrases in verse 14. If we make these phrases explicit, the text would read: “But if [you claim to be wise while at the same time] you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast [about your so-called wisdom] and be false to the truth.” As opposed to the “good conduct” and humble deeds (v. 13) that are outward expressions of true wisdom, false wisdom pours forth evil conduct and arrogant boasting. James homes in on several representative aspects of this evil conduct, but first looks to the inside of the person (to the “heart”), as any outward behavior is an overflow of the heart. A person with false wisdom is characterized by “bitter jealousy.” Jealousy is the wicked desire for the abilities, possessions, or status of another. James modifies “jealousy” with the

word “bitter,” making abundantly clear that an attitude of resentful competition is inextricable from this jealousy.³⁰

“Selfish ambition” (v. 14) is another sinful heart condition antithetical to true wisdom. Although there is a godly ambition that should not be suppressed, James here describes a prideful inner desire to promote oneself or one’s personal concerns without reference to God or the genuine needs of others. James’s words serve as an audit of the heart, inviting repentance from sin and renewed reliance on Christ’s righteousness.

The opposite of repentance from one’s bitter jealousy and selfish ambition is covering them up and continuing to play the hypocrite, who is neither wise nor sincere. James warns persons in this situation, “Do not boast [about your supposed wisdom] and be false to the truth” (v. 14). In other words, if James’s teaching exposes a sin-sick heart, do not lie about it. Face the truth of your lack of true wisdom, repent, and humbly trust in the all-wise God rather than vaunting your false and foundationless “wisdom.”

In verse 15, James attacks the origins of this facade of wisdom. Such false wisdom (emerging from the rotten heart) is not from God (i.e., it does not come down “from above”; cf. 1:17). Rather, the masquerade of wisdom is “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (3:15). Bitter jealousy and selfish ambition are, at their root, expressions of a worldly and demonic rebellion against God. They are certainly not evidence of the Spirit’s transforming work. Apart from the gentle, convicting work of the Spirit, who is strong enough to face up to his deep wickedness? Worldly approval and demonic lies so easily lull us into self-deception.

Though one can never look into the hearts of others (and only with dim perception see one’s own heart), the fruit of false wisdom is clear for all to see. James says that the jealousy and selfish ambition of a wicked heart cannot be contained but will express itself in “disorder and every vile practice” (v. 16). Even though a person may be able to deceive others temporarily as to the state of his supposed wisdom, over time the sinful storm in his heart will inevitably break out in relational discord and all kinds of specific external transgressions. One is reminded of Jesus’ words to the Pharisees:

Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. (Matt. 12:33–35)

3:17–18 The last two verses in this section provide a contrast to the false wisdom James has been critiquing. True wisdom, says James, finds its origin in God (i.e., “from above”). This Spirit-given wisdom is characterized by both internal and

³⁰ The Greek word translated “jealousy” is *zēlos*, which can, in other contexts, have positive connotations of “zeal” (e.g., 2 Cor. 7:11; 9:2), so the modifier “bitter” (*pikros*) helps clarify which nuance of *zēlos* is intended.

external fruits. James begins and ends his list with internal qualities. Internally, true wisdom is “pure” (i.e., fundamentally motivated not by sin but by goodness and holiness). True wisdom is also “sincere”; it is not “playing to the crowd” but is a genuine expression of a heart redirected by God. Sandwiched between these internal foundations of wisdom are representative visible qualities. Truly wise people are “peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere” (v. 17). Just as false wisdom overflows into “disorder and every vile practice” (v. 16), so true wisdom bears distinct and recognizable fruits. Any claim to wisdom is ultimately tested by observable “good conduct” (v. 13).

The last verse in this section (v. 18) is a bit difficult to connect with the preceding discussion. Given the immediately preceding verse, where one of the fruits of true wisdom is being “peaceable” (v. 17), it seems prudent to read verse 18 as a continued discussion of peace. (Further showing connection, the Greek word *karpos*, translated as “fruits” in verse 17, appears in verse 18 as well, translated as “harvest.”) A wise (and thus peaceable) person goes through life “making peace” (v. 18) with those around him. The long-term fruit of such a manner of life (lived “in peace”; v. 18) is “a harvest of righteousness” (i.e., an abundance of righteous behavior in the peacemaker and in those whom he influences). In other words, James ends this section (vv. 13–18) by reminding his readers that the truly wise person is a peacemaker (cf. Matt. 5:9) who leaves behind a legacy of righteous behavior and influence.

Response

In evangelical, doctrinally reformed circles, how do we judge someone to be wise? By the amazing endorsements on the back of an author’s most recent book? From astute conversations about current theological disputes? By thousands of Twitter followers? Through an eponymous and frequently visited webpage? By knowing the “movers and shakers” and sitting on the same conference platform as they? The world will always seek to define wisdom by visible standards whereby one exalts oneself over others. Divine wisdom, on the other hand, is mainly identifiable through one’s private pattern of righteous behavior, performed in an attitude of humility.

James 3:13–18 is a call to let the Spirit of God search our hearts. In an attempt to appear “wise” as church leaders or scholars, are we actually driven by “selfish ambition” (v. 16)? When others succeed in ministry, do we wallow in “jealousy” (v. 16)? How do we feel when another Christian leader preaches a great sermon, writes a fantastic book, or gets promoted? Although we may outwardly congratulate the person, what is the condition of our “hearts” (v. 14)? Do we find bitterness, anger, resentment, turmoil, or “disorder” (v. 16) spilling out from within?

Wicked sinner, do not despair! Repent (daily!), thank God for kindly revealing our sin, and rest in the finished work of Christ. Know that we are accepted because of Christ and not because of the purity of our motives or actions.

Is even our repentance filled with ill motives, deceit, and pride? Then “repent of your repentance,” as one Puritan said. We can still serve God boldly, moving

forward in faith, knowing that even though our weak service is often tainted with sin, our gracious heavenly Father is eager to forgive his children who ask for mercy (Luke 18:13–14). We must ask for God to fill us with true wisdom, which reveals itself in the beautiful fruit of righteousness and peace. Meanwhile, we look forward to the new heaven and new earth, in which all of our motives, actions, and words will be completely holy.

JAMES 4:1–12

4 What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions¹ are at war within you?² ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. ⁴You adulterous people!³ Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? ⁶But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

¹¹Do not speak evil against one another, brothers.⁴ The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

¹Greek *pleasures*; also verse 3 ²Greek *in your members* ³Or *You adulteresses!* ⁴Or *brothers and sisters*

Section Overview

In 4:1–12, James focuses on conflicts among the Christians he addresses. The passage can be divided into three sections. The first section (vv. 1–3) is a passionate appeal for the believers to examine the reality and origin of the conflicts among them. Their disagreements are undeniable, and the true source of those disagreements is the wicked desires of their own hearts. The second section (vv. 4–10) contains James’s prophetic denunciation of their worldly quarrels. James calls them to submit themselves to God, resist the Devil, and humble themselves in outward expressions of genuine repentance. Finally, in the third section (vv. 11–12) James

warns against one particular manifestation of community conflict—slanderous and critical speech.

Section Outline

- IX. Community Discord and a Call to Repentance (4:1–12)
 - A. Description of the Community's Conflicts and Motives (4:1–3)
 - B. Prophetic Denunciation and Call to Repentance (4:4–10)
 - C. A Rebuke of Critical, Judgmental Speech (4:11–12)

Comment

4:1–3 Did James know of specific quarrels among the Christians he addressed? Perhaps. Or, with Spirit-given insight into fallen human nature, perhaps James addresses an issue that arises (sooner or later) within every gathering of people. He denotes the beginning of a new section with a question and a shift in topic. He asks, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” In skillful pastoral style, James draws out his readers, who, if allowed to respond, could surely have enumerated a list of individuals and situations causing conflict in the community. Wrong, says James. The quarrels in the community were caused neither by people nor by specific wrongs committed against them. Rather, the invisible “passions . . . at war within you” (v. 1) were causing this intracommunity fighting. James directs his readers to look into their own hearts and ask what wicked, self-focused desires within them are the actual cause of the external conflicts they are experiencing.

If any doubt remains as to what such “passions” (v. 1) are, James removes the ambiguity in verse 2. He paints a picture of people driven by covetous desires for others’ belongings, status, relationships, or influence. The actual objects of illicit desire are not explicitly stated, perhaps to allow a broad application by James’s hearers.

In the first part of verse 2, we are surprised to read James’s accusation, “You desire and do not have, so you murder.” Does James mean that members of this early Christian community were actually killing each other? Given James’s relatively subdued tone and the fact that the verse continues with a discussion of coveting and quarreling, it does not seem that literal murder is intended. If it were, we would expect this accusation to appear in a more climactic position in the passage. Erasmus (1466–1536) suggested a copying mistake had been made in the Greek manuscript tradition and the text should read not *phoneuete* (“you murder”) but *phthoneite* (“you envy”). Admittedly, this emendation seems to make much sense in context and was adopted by Calvin and others, though no manuscript evidence has been found to support it.³¹ Perhaps it is best to understand “murder” here as a vivid figurative denunciation of people’s hatred (cf. similar language in Matt. 5:21–22; 1 John 3:15).

31 BDAG, s.v. φονεύω; Calvin wrongly believed there were manuscripts of the NT that read *phthoneite* (“you envy”) (*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855], 329).

In 4:2b, James rebukes these quarreling Christians for envying and fighting with each other instead of going to God in prayer. Indeed, a Christian's attitude toward God should be that of a child looking to his loving Father for provision. James echoes the teaching of Jesus, who said, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. . . . If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matt. 7:7, 11)

James continues in 4:3 by noting that even in cases in which his readers have asked God, they have not received because they have asked "wrongly," with corrupt intent. James clarifies this point at the end of verse 3 by adding, "to spend it on your passions" (cf. v. 1). The petitions they have offered are inseparable from their wicked motivation—whether it be pride, greed, lust, or some other sinful inclination.

God graciously invites his children to approach him in prayer, but there is always the condition (stated or implied) that prayer be "according to [God's] will" (1 John 5:14). A wicked desire to have something so as to compete with (or flauntingly surpass) another member of the Christian community is not a desire according to God's will. God is not a vending machine who dispenses toys indiscriminately to those who ask. God is a holy Father who relates to his children so as to promote his ultimate glory and our good in conforming us to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:28–29).

4:4–10 These verses offer both a prophetic denunciation and a gracious invitation. Verse 4 begins with a striking direct address: "You adulterous people!" As the ESV footnote points out, the Greek vocative form here (*moichalides*) is feminine and so could be translated, "You adulteresses!" James here alludes to Israel's unfaithfulness to God, who is depicted in the OT as the nation's "husband" (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 2:2). Similarly, in the NT the church is described with marital imagery as the bride of Christ (e.g., Eph. 5:32; Rev. 21:9). James's arresting language sets before us the ultimate loyalty, faithfulness, and relational intimacy that God's people share with him—and the heinous sin it is to violate that intimacy.

In using terms of "friendship" and "enmity"/"enemy" (James 4:4), James calls his readers to recognize that ultimate devotion can be shown to only one person. His rebuke accords with Jesus' teaching: "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matt. 6:24).

By "world" (4:4), James describes individuals and society with reference to their active rebellion against God. Thus "friendship" with the world means being united closely with values antithetical to God and his kingdom. Looking more broadly at James's letter, friendship with the world would be exhibited, e.g., in a Christian who adulterously buys into the world's values of prestige, pride, and honor. He wickedly desires to be the leader of his local assembly and covets the position belonging to another, slanderously accusing the current leader and stirring up strife in hopes of replacing him. The wicked man does not desire to serve

others or use his gifts. He seeks the role of leader for the raw power, adulation, and social status his wicked heart craves. To hold such values and act upon them is to manifest “friendship” with the world, which, in essence, establishes oneself as an enemy of God.

In verse 5, James appeals to “the Scripture” to support his point that God demands our ultimate loyalty and, like a jealous husband, will not share his bride’s affections. James does not cite a specific passage but summarizes a prevalent OT theme of God’s jealous affection for his people (e.g., Ex. 20:5; 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 6:15). In Greek, the word translated “spirit” (*pneuma*) could be either the subject or the object of the sentence. If “spirit” serves as the subject, the word surely refers to the Holy Spirit as jealously (and righteously) longing for God’s people’s ultimate loyalty. If “spirit” is the object, the word likely refers to the created human spirit, from which God jealously desires full allegiance (so ESV). Regardless of how one translates the verse, the point of God’s holy demand for his people’s unadulterated loyalty is clear.

God’s demand for perfection can sometimes feel overwhelming and unattainable to his sin-stained followers in a broken world. How wonderful, then, that God’s grace is sufficient for his people’s many stumblings. The fiery, consuming jealousy of God is outdone only by his gracious kindness and favor (James 4:6, cf. also Heb. 12:18–21). James quotes the Greek OT text of Proverbs 3:34 to support his argument that, while God will brook no rival (he “opposes the proud”), he is eager to forgive and welcome all who come to him in repentance (he “gives grace to the humble”; James 4:6). Just like the father in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), the heavenly Father is eager to welcome back his children who have wandered off, when they return in humility and repentance.

In 4:7–10, James employs numerous imperatives to call wandering, worldly, double-minded, quarrelsome Christians to repentance: submit, resist, draw near, cleanse, purify, be wretched, mourn, weep, let your laughter be turned to mourning, [let] your joy [be turned] to gloom, humble yourselves. In Hebraic parallelism, many of the commands are balanced with a promise of gracious response. That is, James’s readers are commanded to “draw near to God” and at the same time are assured that “he will draw near to you” (v. 8). They are told to “resist the devil” and also are promised that “[the devil] will flee from you” (v. 7).

We can make several observations concerning the list of imperatives and counterbalancing assurances in this passage:

(1) God uses the instrument of his Word, delivered by human preachers and applied by the Spirit, to call his people to repentance.

(2) Like James, preachers must insist upon the necessity of human repentance while realizing that, apart from the prior convicting work of God, no one will seek him. One should never hesitate to plead passionately with people to draw near to God. Such language does not negate divine sovereignty but assumes it.

(3) Although humans are responsible for their wicked actions, there is a demonic element underlying (or sometimes explicitly present in) all human

rebellion (v. 7). If the Devil had not tempted and deceived the first humans, the world would not have been corrupted by sin. Further, the Devil remains active in this current age through ongoing temptation, deceit, and other tactics.

(4) True repentance involves a change both in inner disposition (“purify your hearts”; v. 8) and in outward behavior tied to that new disposition (“cleanse your hands”; v. 8).

(5) Even though Christians are commanded to be joyful always (Phil. 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16; James 1:2), when one has sinned grievously against God, heartfelt weeping (4:9) is a proper expression of humble sorrow for having disobeyed our loving heavenly Father.

4:11–12 These verses could be read as an independent section condemning slanderous and judgmental speech, but most modern Bible versions include the verses as part of the discourse unit beginning in verse 1. This is to be preferred because: (1) This section is shorter than the independent sections of the letter and thus likely belongs with the paragraph above. (2) This section is the A' section in a small chiasmic structure: A (vv. 1–3), B (vv. 4–10), A' (vv. 11–12). So in other words, viewed rightly, verses 11–12 provide admonitory ballast, matching the opening section and beautifully encircling the central call to repentance. (3) Conceptually, judgmental speech is a concrete example of the quarrels (v. 1) spoken of more abstractly above.

In verse 11 James summarily forbids “speak[ing] evil against one another.” The Greek word translated as “speak evil” (*katalaleō*) is quite broad and encompasses “defamation, slander” (BDAG), and various other kinds of speech attacking another person or harming his reputation. In addressing the congregation as “brothers” at this point (v. 11), James highlights the sad irony that spiritual siblings need to be restrained from such destructive calumny. At many places in his letter James seems to be reflecting on Leviticus 19. Here he may have in mind Leviticus 19:16: “You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people.”

In addition, James writes that a believer should not “judge” his brother (4:11), either in speech or in thought. Indeed, James tells us that in maligning or judging a Christian brother, we are actually slandering or judging God’s holy law. How can this be? In taking upon oneself the role of judge and accuser, a Christian arrogates to himself a position that the law never gives to him and so in essence disregards and disrespects the law, apparently judging it as not accurate or worthy of his obedience. Ironically, the man who plays the judge (applying the law to others in judgmental accusation) is himself the one flagrantly breaking God’s law by failing to love his neighbor. The proper response to the law, James tells us, is not to seize from it the role of judicial accuser but rather to submit oneself to it in humble obedience.

God alone is the lawgiver and the judge, so to misuse his law and illegitimately seize his duties is an offense indeed. By speaking of God’s unique purview to “save” and “destroy,” James highlights the incomparable sovereignty and authority of the divine lawmaker and judge. Eternal life and eternal destruction are in his hands.

James closes this section with the searching question, “But who are you to judge your neighbor?” The obvious answer is, “I am a fool to judge my neighbor. I have wickedly and wrongly claimed for myself the knowledge and authority that only God has. Rather than focusing my attention on loving and obeying God’s law, I have nitpicked others’ obedience and jumped to conclusions about their actions and their motives. I have not loved but rather have slandered and judged.”

Response

Where two or more gather together, there will eventually be conflict. Because of our remaining sin nature, even Christians will inevitably sin against one another. The question, then, is not whether Christian communities will experience conflict. The question is, how will they respond?

James teaches us not to point fingers at others but rather to ask God to lay bare our own hearts. When we experience conflict, we should pray, “Oh God, in what ways is sin *in my heart* contributing to this conflict? Where is my pride, anger, and defensiveness on display?” As the Spirit reveals sin in our own hearts, we should humble ourselves by confessing our sin to God and repenting of it. In repentance, we turn away from sin, resisting walking in the rebellious, devilish way of worldly quarrels.

We should also humble ourselves by confessing our sins to others. God can transform an entire community as one Christian initiates the “chain reaction of repentance” by saying to another, “I have been prideful and angry in my interactions with you. It was wrong and wicked. Please forgive me.” This sort of humble, clear, public repentance ignited the early-twentieth-century Christian revivals in Korea.

Some of the language James uses to call for repentance sounds quite foreign to twenty-first-century evangelical experience: “Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom” (4:9). Do those descriptions seem a bit extreme? In fact, James’s letter exposes our superficial spirituality—a veneer of religiosity that fails to see clearly the horror of sin and the holiness of God. What adulterous wife would consider her marital relationship restored after one offhanded apology to her husband? In fact, we should grieve deeply when we sin against our holy Father. Although Christians receive once-for-all judicial forgiveness at the moment of salvation, we are called to experience regular relational forgiveness through ongoing repentance and faith. Jesus taught his followers to pray regularly, “Forgive us our debts” (Matt. 6:12). In James 4:1–12, James calls for bellicose Christians to confess and repent of their sins in the pattern taught by Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer.

Relational conflict often manifests itself in judgmental attitudes and hurtful words. It is fitting that James closes this section by reminding us that God alone is Judge. Other persons will treat us wrongly, but in such situations we are never allowed to take revenge or seek personal vindication.³² We usually know very little

³² When civil laws have been broken, however, Christians may certainly appeal to government authorities, who rightly “bear the sword” (Rom. 13:4).

about the situation and the other person's actions, perspectives, or motivations. We should instead entrust the case fully to God. Sometimes we should speak directly, in love, to those who have wronged us, but if we speak hurtfully about them or to them, we are, in essence, acting as their judge and the executioner of their reputations. The apostle Paul's words (quoting from Deut. 32:35) accord with James's: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19).

JAMES 4:13–17

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"—¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.

Section Overview

In this section, James rebukes Christians who presumptively boast of their future plans. Instead, followers of Jesus should acknowledge their creaturely transience and rely on the Lord for ongoing life and strength. In diatribe style, the section begins with a quote from arrogant and self-deceived planners. Next, James reminds them that their lives are a vanishing mist. The proper response to our human limitations is humble acknowledgment of our reliance upon our sovereign God—both for the enacting of our plans and for life itself. James ends by reproving the conceit of the interlocutors and calls for Christians to "do the right thing" (cf. James 4:17).

Section Outline

- X. Presumptive Planning Rebuked (4:13–17)
 - A. Presumptive Attitude Illustrated (4:13)
 - B. The Transience of Life and the Sovereignty of God (4:14–15)
 - C. Closing Rebuke and Applicable Proverb (4:16–17)

Comment

4:13 James signals the beginning of a new discourse unit with a formulaic imperative ("Come now") and a shift in topic. As earlier in the letter (2:18–20), James here employs a diatribe style by introducing an imaginary interlocutor—or, in

this case, interlocutors—who represent an erroneous view he wishes to correct. The words of the interlocutors themselves are tellingly nonspecific (“Today or tomorrow . . . such and such a town . . .”), further demonstrating that this is not an actual quote from real people but a representative error placed in the mouths of typical opponents.

The interlocutors state that they plan to go on a journey, spend a year at their destination, and make money in business or trade. As this quote is immediately followed by a rebuke in verse 14, some interpreters have wrongly concluded that James was attacking profit-making or business in general. As we will see below, James is criticizing not the making of a profit but the godless presumption of thinking that one’s life, future, plans, and success rest in one’s own hands. The Bible teaches that greed is wrong but that working honestly and making a profit is commendable.³³ Barring deception or collusion, selling items at a profit is a market signal that one is providing a desired product in an efficient manner. The apostle Paul encourages his congregations to work hard, make an honest profit, and thus have something to share with others (Eph. 4:28).

4:14–15 The issue with the interlocutors is not their desire to make money, nor even their plans. The problem, James tells us, is the arrogant godlessness underlying their words and plans. They forget that they are creatures of dust, as short-lived as the summer grass (Ps. 103:15). In fact, James points out, they do not even know what will happen tomorrow (James 4:14). One is reminded of Jesus’ reminder to his disciples that they could not add a single moment to their lives (Matt. 6:27).

James tells his interlocutors that their lives are a “mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.” The Greek term translated “mist” (*atmis*) can refer to smoke from a fire (LXX Gen. 19:28; Lev. 16:13) or to vapor, such as morning fog or steam rising from a pot (BDAG). The metaphor is clear: just as the morning fog is visible but then quickly dissipates, so are the lives of humans. The brevity and contingency of human life, especially in contrast to God’s eternality and aseity,³⁴ is a common motif in the OT (Pss. 39:5; 102:3; 144:4; Job 7:7).

In light of human creatureliness, there is only one proper course of action: humble and genuine acknowledgment of one’s dependence on the Creator God in all of one’s endeavors. James suggests a method of expressing this humble dependence, but if these words are used as a thoughtless formula (much like ending prayers “in Jesus’ name” without understanding what that expression means), then the letter’s teaching is not being truly obeyed. The “Jacobean condition”³⁵ (“if the Lord wills”) in verse 15 need not always be expressed orally, but the phrase contains timeless truths that should always be found in the attitude of God’s people.

³³ Cf. the helpful dissertation by David Scott Kotter, “Working for the Glory of God: The Distinction between Greed and Self-Interest in the Life and Letters of the Apostle Paul” (PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, May 2015).

³⁴ According to the divine attribute of “aseity,” God is the source of his own existence.

³⁵ So called for *Iakōbos*, the Greek for James.

4:16–17 After providing corrective theological teaching concerning human contingency and transience, James circles back to a final rebuke. He censures the presumptive planners for their evil “boasting” and “arrogance” (v. 16). Although some might describe their plans as expressions of healthy self-confidence, James labels them for what they are: apart from humbly accepting one’s place as a contingent creature before an all-powerful Creator, planning is presumptuous, boastful, and implicitly atheistic.

In verse 17 James cites a proverb that bears a variety of applications: “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.” Within the immediate context, the “right thing” is clearly to acknowledge how brief and unpredictable life is from our limited perspective. In light of that truth, we should live in humility.

Response

Most persons using this commentary will, without hesitation, affirm the sovereignty of God and their own creaturely contingency. Yet the question remains: in planning and managing our actual day-to-day lives, are we practical atheists? Are our prayers simply a formulaic show? Have we already decided (with godless certainty) what is going to happen in our lives, families, and churches?

Many Christians explicitly qualify any future plans by speaking or writing the letters “D.V.,” an abbreviation of *Deo volente*, a Latin phrase meaning “God willing” (cf. 4:15). Whether we realize it or not, all of our plans and endeavors exist under this “Jacobean condition.” Should modern Christians always say or write “D.V.”? Given our pharisaical tendencies, the practice could quickly become a self-aggrandizing parade. Yet James does explicitly instruct us to “say” (*legō*) “If the Lord wills . . .” Just as the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9–13) provides Christians with a template for our diverse daily prayers, so the Jacobean condition affords a guide that can be modified in a variety of ways. Where in our lives do we need to remember and express our status as contingent creatures before a sovereign Creator? Where have we been presumptuous or boastful in our planning?

JAMES 5:1–6

5 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. ⁴Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You have lived

on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

Section Overview

In the pattern of an OT prophet (cf. Amos 1:3–2:3), James condemns the pagan, wicked rich who are oppressing members of the early Christian community. Unlike the sections above addressing discord (James 4:1–12) and presumption (4:13–17), here no offer of repentance is given (cf. 4:6–10, 15). James condemns rich oppressors for hoarding treasure “in the last days” (5:2–3), failing to pay their workers fairly (v. 4), living in luxurious self-indulgence (v. 5), and grossly mistreating the “righteous” (i.e., the poor), depriving them of their livelihood and perhaps even their actual lives (v. 6).

Section Outline

- XI. Condemnation of the Wicked Rich (5:1–6)
 - A. Declaration of the Coming Judgment (5:1)
 - B. Hoarded Treasures (5:2–3)
 - C. Defrauded Wages (5:4)
 - D. Luxurious Lifestyle (5:5)
 - E. Mistreatment and Murder of the Righteous (5:6)

Comment

5:1 James announces that he is beginning a new section of the letter by using a formulaic imperative (“Come now”) and the nominative of address (“you rich”; Gk. *hoi plousioi*). One might initially assume that James is addressing rich Christians within the church, but as we continue reading, two observations challenge that assumption: (1) Within this discourse unit (vv. 1–6), James offers no hope of repentance (cf. 4:6–10 and 4:15). (2) James’s language implies final condemnation rather than temporary discipline. The Greek word translated “howl” (*ololyzō*; v. 1), e.g., is usually associated with judgment in the Septuagint.

Why, though, would James address wicked, non-Christian, rich oppressors when they would likely not be in the Christian gathering to hear his letter read? James here probably follows an OT prophetic pattern in which the wicked outsider is condemned. This is done both to give hope to the righteous and to warn any who might be tempted to follow the same rebellious route (cf., e.g., Amos 1:3–2:3, where the prophet condemns Damascus, Moab, etc.).³⁶

5:2–3 Here James begins offering specific reasons as to why the rich outsiders are viewed as wicked and therefore are rightly condemned. James says their “riches

³⁶ Calvin writes that James “has a regard to the faithful, that they, hearing of the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their fortune, and also that knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they suffered, they might with calm and resigned mind bear them” (*Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 342).

have rotted,” their “garments are moth-eaten” (v. 2), and their “gold and silver have corroded” (v. 3). In the ancient world, gold and silver were valued for their lustrous beauty, and although silver tarnishes, gold does not. James’s unexpected image of corroded gold indicates that his language here moves beyond bare reporting to prophetic denunciation.

Throughout verses 2–3, James employs the Greek perfect tense to describe the rotting of riches, deterioration of clothing, and corrosion of metals. The Greek perfect tense normally describes an existing or resulting state. Thus James seems to be asserting that the wicked person’s riches, clothing, and precious metals have all deteriorated and now sit ruined. How can this be? The early Christians who were reading James’s condemnation of their wicked, rich oppressors could see these very people walking around in fine clothes with shining gold jewelry. James is clearly speaking in a prophetic and metaphorical fashion. The wicked person’s riches are rotted in the sense that they have been hoarded instead of being used for the good of others. Decay of this hoarded wealth is not currently visible to the naked eye, but on the day of judgment, the oppressors’ misuse and abuse of wealth will testify against them. The pile of hoarded riches is, so to speak, a bonfire of evidence they must face in the presence of a just God.

The wicked rich’s culpability is increased because of the salvation-historical period in which they live. God has spoken graciously and climactically in the sending his Son (Heb. 1:2). The Son’s return is imminent; it is “the last days” (James 5:3). Yet the rich are laying up for themselves treasure not in heaven but on earth.

5:4 James homes in on one particular economic abuse for which the wicked rich deserve God’s coming judgment: defrauding their employees. In referring to day laborers in agricultural fields, James gives further incidental evidence to support a first-century agrarian context for his readers. He describes laborers as “mowing” the fields. In modern English usage, “mow” refers almost exclusively to the cutting of ornamental grass with machinery, but in that period the term undoubtedly meant the cutting or reaping of standing grain.

James is not condemning business owners in general. Rather, he condemns the economic mistreatment of workers by fraud. One can imagine, e.g., an ancient landowner who agrees with his workers to pay one wage but then pays less when payday comes. Or, perhaps he induces tenant farmers to settle on his land in promise of fair treatment, but after settling them in such a way that relocation would be difficult, he determines to squeeze every denarius that he can from them. Common agricultural laborers would have been at such societal disadvantage as to have essentially no recourse. James encourages his readers, however, that the Lord knows all these injustices and will settle all accounts fairly.

James personifies defrauded wages as witnesses crying out to the Lord against the wicked rich. This testimony may seem to fall on deaf ears in the face of ongoing injustice. Not so, says James. Shifting his images from cries of the wages to the actual cries of the defrauded harvesters, James reassures his readers that these cries

have “reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.” The title “Lord of hosts” (Gk. *kyrios Sabaōth*) is a partial transliteration of a Hebrew (OT) title, referring to God as the powerful commander of the heavenly armies. James reminds defrauded workers that the almighty and just ruler of the universe is aware of their economic exploitation. They need not fear but must wait patiently for his righteous intervention.

5:5 James here condemns the rich who have enjoyed their material prosperity without regard to whether they have rightfully acquired it or whether they have any obligation to share it (for the correct way to steward worldly riches, cf. 1 Tim. 6:17–19). In such “luxury” and “self-indulgence,” the wicked rich are like cattle ravenously eating more than their share of the grain—not aware that they are only making their coming slaughter more fitting (i.e., they will be rightly condemned at the final judgment).

5:6 James ends this part of his letter with stark words of condemnation to the wicked rich: “You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you” (v. 6). While some commentators have detected here a reference to Jesus’ sacrificial death, it is more likely that James uses the singular “righteous person” (Gk. *ton dikaion*) in a generic way. While the wicked rich were not actually cutting the throats of the poor, by depriving them of proper wages to pay for their daily food they were metaphorically murdering them. Such prophetic denunciations find parallels in Second Temple Jewish literature. For example, in the Apocrypha we read, “The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take away a neighbor’s living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of wages is to shed blood” (*Sir.* 34:25–27).³⁷

Response

This passage speaks to both employers and employees. First, to employers this text is a reminder that no activity is outside the sphere of Christ’s lordship. Jesus insists that employees be treated with equity and benevolence. Workers should never be oppressed or defrauded. Sadly, churches and Christian institutions are frequently guilty of underpaying and overworking their employees. Not a few churches or Christian institutions are guilty of favoritism or negligence on the part of administrators or trustees. James 5:1–6 stands as a fitting reminder of how seriously God views the fair treatment of his people (cf. also Col. 4:1).

To employees who are currently being defrauded or mistreated, this passage reminds them that God is on their side. God cares about their mistreatment, and he will hold their oppressors accountable. Oppressed Christians must not take vengeance into their own hands (cf. Rom. 12:19). They can (and possibly should) look for a more equitable work environment, but while they remain in an unjust setting, God will enable them to work faithfully, for his glory (cf. Col. 3:22–25).

³⁷ *The English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

JAMES 5:7–12

⁷Be patient, therefore, brothers,¹ until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

¹²But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*; also verses 9, 10, 12, 19

Section Overview

James introduces this section with the inferential conjunction *oun* (“therefore”; v. 7), indicating that the following exhortation should be understood in light of the abuse at the hands of the wicked rich, as well as their coming judgment, outlined in 5:1–6. Enduring ill treatment with faith and integrity requires Spirit-empowered strength as believers wait for the imminent return of Christ, who will settle all accounts in complete justice (vv. 7–9). James directs his readers to the example of the OT prophets and Job, who endured great difficulties (vv. 10–11). Finally, James ends this short section with a rejection of oaths (v. 12), a teaching closely paralleling Jesus’ instructions on the same subject (Matt. 5:33–37; 23:16–22).

Section Outline

- XII. Endurance and Integrity in Suffering (5:7–12)
 - A. Waiting for the Lord’s Return (5:7–9)
 - B. The Example of the Prophets and Job (5:10–11)
 - C. Integrity of Speech: The Rejection of Oaths (5:12)

Comment

5:7–9 In light of the economic abuses they were experiencing (“therefore”; v. 7, referring back to 5:1–6), the recipients of James’s letter may have been tempted to despair or to seek vengeance themselves. Neither is the proper course for a

Christian, says James. Instead, one must exercise a Spirit-empowered restraint (“patience”), fueled by the comforting assurance that the Lord Jesus will return and set all things right (v. 7). On that day, no one will be able to accuse the Lord of injustice. Every sin will be exposed and judged. Although Christians can draw comfort in knowing that the Lord will punish their oppressors (2 Thess. 1:5–8; cf. Rom. 12:19), may God grant us grace to desire our enemies’ repentance more than their destruction.

Just as a farmer must wait patiently for the rains that will enable his crops to grow and produce fruit, so Christians must patiently wait for the Lord’s return and settling of accounts (James 5:7). James’s reference to “the early and the late rains” is evidence of either dependence on OT language (Deut. 11:14) or familiarity with Palestinian climate patterns.

While patience is sometimes equated with passivity, through his repeated exhortations James makes clear that patience is a disposition that must be willfully embraced (cf. Psalm 73). James calls upon his readers to “establish your hearts” (James 5:8). By “heart” James refers to the innermost part of the person, which will be tempted to wither in resignation or strike out in retribution. Instead, the internal compass of a Christian should be set on the “due north” of the Lord’s return. We can be strong internally, not because we have the means to effect our own justice but because of the imminent “coming” of the all-powerful Judge who is also our Lord (v. 8). A child abused by a bully on the playground will stand taller when he sees the school’s principal approaching.

As believers experience hardship in this world, they are often tempted to grumble against the Lord or against one another. In calling his recipients “brothers” (v. 9), James reminds them that they are spiritual siblings. We all stumble in many ways (3:2), and the temptation of one Christian to grumble against another must be resisted (5:9), even as we, metaphorically speaking, constantly trip over one another in our sins and weaknesses.

James reminds Christians that the coming Lord will hold them accountable as well for their behavior. In essence, James asks if they would rather hear the Lord declare, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21), or “Why have you stirred up strife among your brothers?” (cf. Prov. 6:19). After all, “the Judge is standing at the door,” says James (5:9). In other words, we ought not be bickering children while the authoritative Father stands right outside the door, certainly listening and ready to enter at any moment.

5:10–11 A farmer provides a memorable image of patience (v. 7), but a more direct parallel of endurance amid unjust suffering is found in the lives of the OT prophets (v. 10). James assumes his recipients’ familiarity with the many accounts of mistreatment and suffering of God’s prophets in the OT. By describing these prophets as those “who spoke in the name of the Lord,” James implies that the prophets’ loyalty to God’s word was the impetus for much of their persecution. Similarly, perhaps aspects of the suffering of James’s readers were due to their loyalty and

obedience to the Lord. Regardless of what caused the prophets' suffering, "We consider those blessed who remained steadfast" (v. 11). In other words, we can look back at the prophets' faithful trust in the Lord through great trial and declare them to be favored by God. Should not their examples inspire us to similar fortitude?

James focuses on one particular OT figure who provides an example of faith amid suffering: Job. A reader of the book of Job may rightly ask, "Did Job really remain steadfast? Didn't he complain a lot?" Yet, even while fully expressing his lament to God, Job did not take his wife's advice to "curse God and die" (Job 2:9). In the end, even though Job was humbled and faced correction (38:1–3; 40:1–5; 42:1–6), he was commended by the Lord both at the beginning (1:8) and at the end (42:7–8) of the book.

One way that James's readers are encouraged by the story of Job is to see "the purpose of the Lord" (James 5:11). The Greek for "purpose" is *telos*, which can also be rendered "outcome" or "goal." By the end of the book of Job, the patriarch admits that he has learned of the sovereignty and goodness of the Lord (Job 42:5–6), and he also experiences restoration, which for James's readers anticipates God's end-time restoration of all things, including his people. Even in great suffering, for which we have no explanation, we know the Lord's story is not finished, for he will triumph. And, James reminds us, we know that the Lord is "compassionate and merciful" (James 5:11).

5:12 This verse begins with the phrase "But above all" (Gk. *pro pantōn de*). Rather than introducing the most important element of the letter (as a modern reader might expect), this stylized phrase was employed by ancient Greek writers to transition to the final section(s) of their correspondence. A modern English equivalent would be something like, "Now, to wrap things up . . ."

It is difficult to see how the swearing of oaths relates to the preceding or following material in James. We do find a direct parallel to James's teaching in the words of Jesus (Matt. 5:33–37; 23:16–22), who attacks both casuistry and the lack of truthfulness in everyday speech implied by the need to swear an oath (i.e., the need for an oath implies our normal speech cannot be trusted). How does this relate to James's letter? When suffering injustice, one can be tempted to protect oneself through deceptive speech. Perhaps James here mentions oaths to call suffering Christians to both endurance of heart and integrity of speech when the pressures of life would lead many to despair or compromise.

Response

In commanding Christians not to swear oaths, James echoes his brother Jesus, who says something almost identical in the Gospel of Matthew. Some Christian communities (e.g., Mennonites) have taken these instructions literally and refuse to swear any oath—even in a court of law. Most Christian traditions, however, have not understood James's and Jesus' prohibitions as absolute. Jesus explicitly condemns oaths because many were using them to create false levels of trust

and to defraud others through deceitful reasoning (Matt. 5:33–37; 23:16–22). In prohibiting oaths, James and Jesus teach that all our words should be completely truthful and forthright. Nevertheless, we live in a broken world that recognizes different levels of legal accountability for speech. To function in such societies, we may occasionally be called upon to take an oath. In such a case (e.g., for testimony in a court), we might dramatically say, “Jesus my Lord calls me to complete truthfulness in all speech, but if you like, I will place my hand on the Bible and swear/promise to tell the whole truth. Nevertheless, even when I do not take an oath, I am bound to the truth.”

The fact that Paul used oath language in his letters (2 Cor. 11:31; Gal. 1:20; Phil. 1:8) further indicates that Jesus’ apostles did not view oaths as categorically forbidden. Nevertheless, if a Christian believes that swearing an oath is a sin, he should not do it. To violate one’s conscience, even in such cases where what one does is not demonstrably forbidden, is sin (1 Corinthians 8–10). By the same token, believers must seek constantly to bring their consciences into greater alignment with the Word of God.

JAMES 5:13–20

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.¹ ¹⁷Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

¹⁹My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

¹Or *The effective prayer of a righteous person has great power*

Section Overview

The final section of James’s letter offers instructions concerning prayer, as well as a closing appeal for those who are wandering from the faith. James begins by commanding prayer for a variety of possible situations: suffering, rejoicing,

sickness (5:13–14). Next, James provides more extended instructions concerning how the church should care for brethren who are sick (vv. 14–15). James encourages believers to confess their sins to one another and pray for each other (v. 16). The OT prophet Elijah’s intercession for rain (1 Kings 17:1; 18:41–46) serves as an example of fervent and effective prayer (James 5:17–18). James ends the letter with an encouragement to seek out and bring back those who are wandering from the faith (vv. 19–20).

Section Outline

XIII. Instructions on Prayer and Concern for Those Straying (5:13–20)

- A. Prayer Appropriate to Any Situation (5:13)
- B. Prayer for the Sick (5:14–15)
- C. Confession and Prayer in Community (5:16)
- D. The Example of Elijah (5:17–18)
- E. Concern for the Straying Christian (5:19–20)

Comment

5:13 James transitions to this section on prayer using a series of short questions and staccato imperatives. “Is anyone among you suffering?” asks James. “Let him pray.” The verb translated “suffering” (*kakopatheō*) is broad in meaning and encompasses any form of external or internal hardship. While believers may be tempted to react to difficulties with grumbling, anger, or discouragement, James reminds us there is one clear and proper Christian response: prayer.

The second question stretches to the other end of human experience: “Is anyone cheerful?” He answers: “Let him sing praise.” A reader might have expected James to ask something like, “Are things going well?” (i.e., an inquiry about external realities). James, however, chooses a word that focuses on the internal disposition of cheerfulness/happiness (*euthymeō*). In referring to suffering and cheerfulness, James covers the broad swath of human experience in this beautiful but broken world. Whether we find happiness or pain in life, we should always go to the Lord. He is a loving heavenly Father who cares for us (Matt. 7:11).

5:14–15 James says a sick person should call the elders of the church to come pray over him. The fact that the elders must be summoned to the house of a sick person indicates he is likely too sick to leave his home easily. Note also that the elders are to pray “over” him (v. 14)—possibly implying that the sick person is bedridden. It is noteworthy that James assumes there will be a plurality of elders in the local congregation. The modern model of a “lone ranger” pastor is a departure from the biblical model of plural eldership.

James instructs the church elders to “anoint” the sick person with oil “in the name of the Lord” (v. 14). Throughout the centuries, Christians have struggled to understand and apply this verse. The Roman church developed the practice of “extreme unction,” in which it was believed that a dying person’s remaining sins

were wiped away through a priest-administered sacrament. Partly in reaction to this error, other Christians insist that the oil here was merely a form of ancient medicine. While it is true that oil was used to cleanse wounds in the first century (cf. Luke 10:34), oil did not have medical application to all of the diseases known at that time.

The closest biblical parallel we find to James's instructions is the disciples' ministry in Mark 6. There Jesus sends out the disciples in groups of two to preach and perform miracles throughout Israel. In Mark 6:13 we read, "They . . . anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them." The oil, both there and in James 5:14, seems to have been a visible, symbolic means of setting the sick person apart for God's miraculous intervention—similar to the way that many modern Christians will place a hand on the shoulder of the person for whom they are praying. James does not emphasize anointing as an imperative act in and of itself but specifies it as something done "in the name of the Lord" (v. 14), that is, as an action performed while calling upon the Lord in faith to heal.

In verse 15 James assures his readers, "The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up." This verse has caused consternation for many interpreters. Some understand the verse eschatologically. That is, regardless of how any sickness ends, the Lord has assured his people that he will save them ultimately and resurrect them on the last day. While theologically true, this interpretation does not adequately respect the immediate context, which favors understanding James as referring to temporal healing.

Other interpreters have seen this promise as referring to a special dispensation of faith given only occasionally. In other words, there are times of praying for the sick in which one will be given a "prayer of faith" that will prove supernaturally effective. Again, this interpretation stumbles over a more natural reading of "prayer of faith," which understands the phrase as referring to a "prayer offered in faith," or "believing prayer."

One distorted form of Christianity argues that Christians should always expect to be healed from sickness in this life. If one is not healed, then that person lacks faith, it is argued. Read in isolation, James 5:15 could seem to support this interpretation, but other passages of Scripture make clear that the sick and suffering are not always healed—even when the request is made in pure (even apostolic!) faith (cf. 2 Cor. 12:8–9). The 100 percent mortality rate of humanity testifies to the fact that all of us will eventually succumb to sickness, injury, or old age.

The statement that "the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick" is best understood as a typical promissory statement that does not necessarily list exceptions. We find many parallels in Jesus' ministry (e.g., "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened"; Matt. 7:7–8). Such invitations are made memorable by focusing attention on God's gracious invitation and our rightful expectation of response.

Of course, submission to God's will should underlie every Christian petition, and sometimes the authors of Scripture make such an understanding explicit (e.g., "If we ask anything according to his will"; 1 John 5:14). All in all, it is the sovereign God, and no one else, who will determine the answers to our prayers.

As James concludes his discussion of praying for the sick, he asserts, "And if [the sick person] has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:15b). Here we are reminded that Scripture testifies that some sickness, even death, comes upon believers as a result of God's fatherly discipline (Acts 5:1–11; 1 Cor. 11:30). Pastors should be wary, however, of always drawing a one-to-one correspondence between sickness and sin, as the Pharisaical opponents of Jesus did (John 9:34). Most human sickness, while not outside of God's divine will, is simply the result of living in a broken world.

5:16 After implying that unconfessed sin could result in physical sickness (v. 15b), James draws the conclusion ("Therefore"; v. 16) that all believers should regularly confess their sins (and, implicitly, turn from their sins in repentance). Although confession *to God* is the most necessary form of confession (Ps. 51:4), any genuine Godward repentance will be mirrored in relationships within the Christian community. Believers should not only confess their sins to those whom they have wronged (Luke 19:8); they should also confess their "secret sins" of pride, lust, resentment, and greed to a trusted fellow believer or believers. Such confession, James tells us, will result in spiritual, if not physical, healing (James 5:16a).

In the latter part of verse 16, James transitions from the subject of praying for spiritual/physical healing to the matter of effective prayer more generally. Specifically, James points out that one can expect tremendous divine power to be unleashed through the prayer of a "righteous person." In one sense, all Christians are "righteous" (*dikaïos*) in that we are justified before God. But the Greek word *dikaïos* can also refer to practical and visible godly behavior (e.g., Matt. 1:19), as it seems to here. In other words, those who walk closely with the Lord can expect to see a powerful response to their petitions (cf. Matt. 17:19–20; 1 John 3:22).

5:17–18 James presents Elijah as an example of a righteous man who prayed effectively. We might be inclined to write off Elijah's life as inimitable because of his prophetic status. Not so, says James: Elijah was "a man with a nature like ours." In other words, Elijah was a sinner like us, with his own failings and weaknesses, and yet through his prayer the Lord did mighty things.

Specifically, James reports that Elijah's prayer was used by God to withhold rain for three and a half years and then to restore it again. The OT text that reports this episode states, less specifically, that God called to Elijah "in the third year" of the drought to go to Ahab and announce the coming rain (1 Kings 18:1). As the number "three and a half" symbolically implies God's judgment in apocalyptic literature (Rev. 11:2; 13:5), perhaps James finds theological significance in reporting the more specific length of the ancient drought. Also, we note that the OT narrative does not explicitly mention that Elijah prayed at the outset of the drought (1 Kings 17:1),

but in light of his regular intercessory work as a prophet of Israel, it is a reasonable inference, confirmed by this inspired text.³⁸

5:19–20 Inevitably, any true Christian reading James’s letter will experience conviction of sin and a desire for confession, repentance, and restoration. Readers will also likely be reminded of those formerly within the Christian community who have strayed from the fold. James ends his letter with a loving exhortation not to neglect the straying sinner but to seek him out with love and truth.

Underlying James’s exhortation is a biblical understanding of perseverance. To “wander from the truth” (v. 19), never to return, proves that one never truly belonged to God (cf. 1 John 2:19). One of the means God has instituted to preserve his people is the loving brotherly concern Christians are to show to one another. As the wandering person is brought back to repentance, the “death” and “sins” referred to in James 5:20 most naturally refer to his sins that are now forgiven and his former visible trajectory toward death that has been arrested by the grace of God communicated through the body of Christ. Only God knows who is truly elect, so if a member of the Christian community begins to live as a nonbeliever, the only right thing to do is warn the person that, from all appearances, he is running toward eternal death. That very warning may be the instrument God uses to preserve his salvation.³⁹

Response

This final section of James is the passage from which I receive the most student questions. People want to know, “What are we supposed to do about these instructions to anoint with oil?” In the church where I serve, when someone asks for the pastors to come pray over them, we seek to have two or more elders present. One of us will bring a small glass bottle of olive oil. We begin by talking with the church member and their family—asking them how they are doing and listening carefully. Then we ask permission to read Scripture, and one of us reads from James 5:13–18 and elsewhere. We then ask if anyone would like to say or share anything else. Next we explain, “I have this little bottle of olive oil. In obedience to Scripture, I am going to take a drop of this oil with my finger and place it on your forehead. This oil is not magic. We, as a church, are setting you apart symbolically before God. We are asking him to intervene and heal you.”

In this last portion of his letter, James also challenges us to embrace the practice of confessing sin to other Christians. Too often we think, “I confess my sins to God. Confessing to others? I do not need to do that!” But, as we see in 5:16, Scripture instructs us to confess our sins to each other and pray for each other (apparently in regard to those sins and struggles) with the wonderful encouragement, “that

³⁸ Doug Moo offers a similar explanation (*Letter of James*, 248), though I was not conscious of his text when composing this paragraph. I have used his Pillar commentary as a textbook for several years and undoubtedly have digested quite a few of his ideas.

³⁹ For a nuanced and helpful approach to the warning passages in Scripture, see Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001).

you may be healed.” It is a healing gift to have one of God’s holy people look you in the eye and say, “Christ died for that sin. Jesus forgives you. I am going to pray that God will enable you not to fall into that sin again.”

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1 PETER

Sam Storms

INTRODUCTION TO 1 PETER

Overview

Although we should resist the temptation to rank the various books of the Bible, as each is equally inspired and profitable for Christian living, it is easy to understand why 1 Peter is a favorite of so many. From its focus on future blessings at Christ's return to its encouragement for those who are presently suffering for their faith, 1 Peter speaks to the needs, anxieties, hopes, and all-too-common fears of Christian men and women everywhere.

The major themes encountered in this letter range from the Christian's identity as a stranger and alien on the earth to the concrete ethical responsibilities we face from day to day, as well as to how we are to conduct ourselves in relation to other believers in the life of the local church. From beginning to end Peter directs our attention to who we are in Christ and how we got there. Simply put, it is all of grace, that glorious and undeserved generosity and saving mercy of God that energizes our obedience and sustains us under the pressure of persecution and pain. It is this latter emphasis on the urgency of faithfulness in the face of hostile opposition that will occupy much of Peter's pastoral energy. As much as some may prefer it to be otherwise, suffering is to be expected in this life. Christians should not be surprised when they encounter slander and reproach from a hostile, unbelieving society. But it is all of God, even the pain, through which he aims to refine our faith and prepare us for the final inheritance that is sure to come when Christ returns.

Author

We must begin with 1 Peter 1:1, where the author identifies himself as "Peter" and later claims to have been an eyewitness of the sufferings of Jesus (1 Pet. 5:1). The author of 2 Peter states that it is the "second letter" he has written (2 Pet. 3:1). The reference to Rome in 1 Peter 5:13 is also consistent with Peter's later life in that city.

The external evidence in support of Peter's authorship is considerable. Donald Guthrie speaks for most evangelical scholars when he concludes, "The primitive church, as far back as any evidence exists, regarded it as a genuine Epistle of Peter,

and thus any discussion of objections to Petrine authorship must sufficiently take account of this fact.”¹

Daniel Wallace has categorized the objections to Petrine authorship as linguistic, historical, and doctrinal.² As for the objection based on linguistics, the Greek of 1 Peter, so it is said, is too sophisticated and polished to be the product of an “uneducated” (Acts 4:13) Galilean fisherman.³ We should remember, however, that this description in Acts likely means that Peter was not formally trained as a rabbi, not that he was illiterate or altogether uneducated. Furthermore, some thirty years passed between the time Peter first met Jesus and the writing of this letter. Is it beyond reason to think that his proficiency in Greek and his literary skills might have greatly improved during those three decades?

Wallace believes that the solution is found in 1 Peter 5:12, where Silvanus (cf. 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1) is mentioned as the one “through” whom the letter was written (cf. comment on 1 Pet. 5:12). While some argue this indicates only that Silvanus delivered the letter to its recipients, Wallace contends that Silvanus was Peter’s amanuensis and that the exceptional Greek prose of the letter reflects more his linguistic skill than that of Peter himself. Ancient secretaries were often given considerable latitude in composing the thoughts of their masters. Thus, whereas Peter would have been the ultimate author of the letter, Silvanus (Silas) was its writer. Or, if not Silvanus, some other anonymous companion of the apostle could have been responsible for its superior Greek.

This theory also has its problems. If Silvanus was the amanuensis, some argue, why is there no greeting directly from him, as we find in the case of Tertius, Paul’s scribe in writing Romans (cf. Rom. 16:22)? Guthrie believes that if Silvanus was the amanuensis, 1 Peter 5:12 “would stand as a rather obnoxious piece of self-commendation, unless in fact Peter himself added this conclusion. It is further difficult to imagine that the direct appeal of verse 1ff. could have been the indirect work of a secretary. The personal authority is so real that it would be necessary to maintain that for this part of the letter the apostle had dictated.”⁴

Another historically grounded objection to Petrine authorship is the difficulty in reconciling the letter’s portrayal of suffering with what we know to be true in the empire during Peter’s lifetime. Further, there is no indication that the persecution imposed by Nero subsequently spread into the provinces where Peter’s audience resided. Peter, of course, would not have known this,

1 Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1970), 773. All this must be weighed against the arguments that deny Petrine authorship. For a complete and convincing response to the arguments against Petrine authorship, including the claim for pseudonymity, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 22–36; Daniel B. Wallace, *First Peter: Introduction, Argument, and Outline* (www.bible.org, 2000), 7–8.

2 Wallace, *First Peter*, 1.

3 Many argue that the individual responsible for the poor Greek of 2 Peter could not have written 1 Peter, and vice versa. There are several excellent discussions of this question. See the comments by Karen Jobes, “Excursus: The Syntax of 1 Peter: How Good Is the Greek?” in *1 Peter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 325–338; Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 2–9; and Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 24–31.

4 Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 780.

and he surely assumed that persecution of some sort was the inevitable experience of most followers of Jesus in the first century. More probable still is the theory that the sort of persecution in view in this letter was standard wherever Christians resided.

A closer look indicates that the suffering these churches endured was largely, if not exclusively, verbal slander, reproach, and false accusations (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6; 2:12, 15; 3:9, 16; 4:12, 16). The situation appears to reflect a time in which the threat against Christians had not yet escalated to the point that believers were losing their lives. Followers of Jesus must expect their devotion to him as Lord and their distinctive lifestyle to provoke opposition and reproach by private individuals who are afraid of and offended by the Christian faith (cf. 2:12 and 4:4). Guthrie is most likely correct in stating, “There is little distinctive about the ‘persecutions’ in 1 Peter which would not apply to the opposition that Christians had to endure from the inception of the Church.”⁵

The persecutions mentioned here were likely sporadic and unorganized, not state-sponsored. “Peter describes the suffering, and hence the persecution that caused it, as worldwide (5:9), suggesting a type of persecution that potentially threatens all Christians *as Christians*, and not the execution of official Roman policy in any one place.”⁶

A significant doctrinal objection to Petrine authorship is the consistent pattern throughout the letter of what appears to be dependence upon the Pauline letters. But as Jobes points out, “First Peter contains no references to Paul or to his letters, and the similarities between the two are based on similarities in terms and themes that can be plausibly explained as both authors drawing on common Christian tradition, perhaps particularly the Christian tradition of Rome.”⁷

Date and Occasion

The theme of suffering is important in determining the condition of the letter’s recipients at the time of writing, as well as determining when the letter was written (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6; 3:9, 14; 4:1, 12, 16, 19; 5:9–10). As already noted, if Peter was writing from Rome, he may well have anticipated the spread of anti-Christian sentiment. Greg Forbes has suggested, “The positive references to the state in 2:11–17 make it less likely that state oppression is the issue.”⁸ Thomas Schreiner reminds us that there is no indication that anyone died under the persecution of those to whom Peter wrote, and thus, “The letter could easily have been written during Nero’s reign, when opposition to the Christian movement was localized.”⁹ It is thus likely that Peter wrote in the mid-sixties AD. Schreiner dates the letter to around AD 62–63, before the onset of the Neronian persecution.¹⁰

⁵ Ibid., 783.

⁶ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 9.

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Greg W. Forbes, *1 Peter: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 3.

⁹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

Destination and Situation of the Readers

The reference to Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 is probably a cryptic reference to Rome, indicating that Peter was living there when he wrote. Although some have pointed to historic Babylon as the referent, there is no evidence that Peter, Silvanus, or Mark were ever there, much less simultaneously.

The letter is addressed to believers spread throughout “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1). This would include Christians living in the northwest quadrant of Asia Minor, on the Black Sea.

One of the more disputed issues relating to 1 Peter is whether his readers were primarily Jews or Gentiles. Given the frequency with which he refers to or cites the OT (1:16, 24–25; 2:3, 6–10, 22; 3:10–12; 4:18; 5:5), Peter clearly assumes they would have been familiar with it. He mentions Sarah and Abraham (3:6) and Noah (3:20) as well.

However, this evidence has not been sufficient to convince most evangelical scholars that Peter’s first readers were Jewish. Two factors in particular lead to the conclusion that he wrote to a predominantly Gentile audience: (1) The description in 1:14 of the letter’s recipients as having lived in “ignorance” points to an idolatrous and pagan past. (2) According to 1:18 (cf. 4:3), these readers had been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from [their] forefathers.” As Jobes points out, many argue that “Diaspora Jews of the first century could never have been described in such spiritually bankrupt terms and . . . the ways of Judaism would never have been described as a ‘useless way of life.’”¹¹

None of this should be taken as suggesting that the churches in Asia Minor were exclusively Gentile, but they were predominantly so. One objection has been raised based on the conclusion that Peter had been “assigned” the task of reaching the Jews with the gospel, with Paul being assigned to the Gentiles (cf. Gal. 2:6–10). But this should not be taken to mean that both men were locked into a particular missionary strategy for the duration of their ministries. Peter appears among Gentiles in Antioch (Gal. 2:11), and Paul often preached in Jewish synagogues. The following is perhaps the most balanced summation of the issue:

It seems that the writer is concerned neither with Jews nor Gentiles as such, but with those who in Christ have become the people of God. We need not doubt that most who came from the provinces named were Gentiles, although there would have been some Jewish converts. But the emphasis is on what they have become, not on what they were originally.¹²

Genre and Literary Structure

Karen Jobes rightly describes the genre of 1 Peter as that of “personal correspondence.”¹³ Paul Achtemeier concurs, concluding that there is “little reason to

¹¹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 23.

¹² D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 425.

¹³ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 54.

question the identification of 1 Peter as a circular letter addressed to Christian communities scattered over the northern half of Asia Minor.”¹⁴ A few have tried to identify 1 Peter as a baptismal document. However, water baptism is mentioned only in 1 Peter 3:21, although advocates of this view are inclined to find allusions to the rite in a number of other texts. Thus I concur with Grudem that “The thesis that 1 Peter was originally a liturgy or perhaps a sermon at a baptism remains unconvincing and provides an unsatisfactory setting for the composition of the letter. It is far better to understand the letter as written by Peter to distant Christians in genuine need of its teaching and encouragement.”¹⁵

Only the most critical of scholars believe the letter to be a patchwork effort. Some have argued that the doxology in 4:11 signals the end of main letter, with the remainder of the letter constituting an entirely different treatise, based on the idea that the latter portrays an intensified persecution. However, “The weight of scholarship today understands 1 Peter to be a unified text written by one author for one purpose at one time.”¹⁶

Theology of 1 Peter

This letter is richly theological, but four themes merit special attention.

JESUS CHRIST

First Peter is thoroughly Christocentric. The letter is meaningless apart from the person and saving work of Christ. The Christian is saved and set apart “for obedience to Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:2), who, together with the Father, is “blessed” (1:3). We have hope only because of “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1:3). Our faith, refined by the fire of daily trials, will be on display when the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7, 13) occurs at the close of history. In advance of that day, we “love him” and “believe in him” (1:8) even though we “do not now see him” (1:8).

The centrality of the saving life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is seen nowhere better than in the fact that “the prophets” of the old covenant predicted his “sufferings” and “subsequent glories” (1:11).

We rejoice in the knowledge that our redemption can be traced to the shedding of the “precious blood of Christ” (1:19), through whom we are now “believers in God” (1:21). Jesus is the “living stone” (2:4) on whom the church is being built and through whom our “spiritual sacrifices” (2:5) are deemed acceptable to God. All mankind is divided based on their response to this Jesus: some believe in him and will not be put to shame (2:6), while others do not believe but stumble over him, to their own destruction (2:7–8).

When we are suffering unjustly at the hands of an unbelieving world, Jesus Christ provides us with the only pattern of response (2:21–25).

¹⁴ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 62.

¹⁵ Grudem, *First Epistle of Peter*, 41.

¹⁶ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 53.

Our sins are forgiven for only one reason: “he himself bore [them] in his body” on the cross (2:24).

Because of who Jesus is and what he has done for hell-deserving sinners, we are always to be prepared to give an account for our hope in him (3:15). The only reason we are brought “to God” is that Jesus has “suffered once” for our “sins” (3:18). And we can confidently face all opposition knowing that he has conquered death and proclaimed his victory over the demonic powers who are now subject to his sovereign rule (3:19–22).

Our battle with sin is rooted in Christ’s victory over it (4:1–2). Our ability to rejoice in suffering comes from knowing that his glory will be revealed in us now and especially at his return (4:12–14). Elders serve the church under Christ’s authority as the chief Shepherd of souls (5:1–4). It is into his “eternal glory” that we have been called (5:10) and through him alone that we have the joy and comfort of inexpressible “peace” (5:14).

ESCHATOLOGY

In keeping with the Christological focus of the letter, we repeatedly see Peter grounding his ethical exhortations in the consummation of Christ’s second coming and the grace and glory that will accompany his return. The certainty of this return and the expectation it generates is never for Peter a reason to speculate or an excuse to sin or become slothful. Christ’s coming serves always and only to motivate the believer to heartfelt and passionate obedience.

Christians are being guarded for a salvation “ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:5). It is “at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7) that our faith will be seen as having been purified by trials (1:7). Christ’s return is the “hope” (1:13) on which we are to fix our minds. The “day of visitation” (2:12) will be an opportunity for God to be glorified through our good deeds. Indeed, “The end of all things is at hand” (4:7), calling for self-control and sober-minded prayer. When Christ’s “glory is revealed” (4:13), we will rejoice for having shared in his sufferings. Peter himself exhorts the elders of the church as one who with them will soon be a “partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed” (5:1). Elders must never grow weary in well-doing as they look to the unfading crown of glory they will receive “when the chief Shepherd appears” (5:4).

SUFFERING

The primary appeal Peter makes to his readers is to remain steadfast in faith in spite of the suffering they must endure. Trials, though grievous, are temporary and are thus actually an occasion for joy as they serve to refine our faith (1 Pet. 1:6–7). God is especially pleased when his people bear up under undeserved suffering, for this is precisely how the glory of Christ himself was made known (2:19–25). Suffering for righteousness’ sake brings blessing (3:14) and is a gateway to a reasoned defense and explanation for why our hope is in Christ (3:15–16).

For the Christian, suffering is inevitable. Endurance now leads to joy at the revelation of Christ's glory (4:13). The promise of God is that an extraordinary infusion of strength from the Spirit comes to those who bear up under insult and slander (4:14). God is glorified when one is persecuted for no other reason than that he or she is a "Christian" (4:16).

Peter could not be clearer when he says that suffering abuse for being a Christian is "according to God's will" (4:19). Contrary to those who insist that godly and faithful living will insulate the believer from hardship, Peter promises persecution. But God will prove to be a "faithful Creator" (4:19) to those who cherish his favor more than they do release from pain.

Finally, there is strength and endurance to be found in knowing that one does not suffer alone. The "brotherhood throughout the world" (5:9) is likewise being subjected to the "same kinds of suffering" (5:9). And we must never forget that, however burdensome our suffering may be, it is only for a "little while" (5:10). Through it all God has promised to "restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish" us (5:10).

SOJOURNERS AND STRANGERS

Much more will be noted in the commentary that follows, but here we take brief note of the recurring theme that Christians are not merely citizens of an earthly state but are to live as "elect exiles" throughout the earth (1 Pet. 1:1). The "time" of our "exile" (1:17) calls for godly fear and reverent behavior. It is precisely because we are "sojourners and exiles" (2:11) that we are to abstain from passions of the flesh rooted in this fallen earthly theater.

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

On no fewer than twenty occasions does Peter cite the OT Scriptures, and yet, as D. A. Carson notes, "The quotations tell only a small part of the story, for 1 Peter is also laced with allusions to the OT."¹⁷ One author identifies as many as forty-one allusions, whereas if "echoes" were included, "scarcely a verse in this epistle would be exempt."¹⁸

Perhaps the most important feature to note in this regard is how Peter cites the OT in its portrayal of Israel as the people of God and applies these titles, privileges, and descriptive phrases to the NT church (1 Pet. 2:9–10). As far as Peter is concerned, there is only one people of God, the elect, who now together, regardless of ethnicity, constitute the church of Jesus Christ.

This element of continuity is seen most clearly in the way that Peter speaks of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of countless OT prophetic promises and types. In numerous OT texts both the "sufferings" and the "subsequent glories" (1:11) of Christ were prefigured, typified, prophesied, and symbolized. The "precious blood

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, "1 Peter," in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1015.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

of Christ” is the fulfillment of the shed blood of the Passover lamb (1:19), which alone can ransom souls from bondage to sin. The “cornerstone” laid in Zion was Christ (2:6), and the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is now openly identified as Jesus, by whose “wounds” we have been “healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Peter also reminds us that whatever was prophesied during the time of the old covenant concerning the Messiah was inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit, who is “the Spirit of Christ” himself (1:11). Thus, “by showing how the Christian gospel forms continuity with the Old Testament prophetic message, Peter provides an apology for the cross and a foundation for his exhortations to his readers.”¹⁹ Jobes’s summary is helpful:

Peter’s hermeneutic sees the Christian gospel as the full flowering of Israel’s religion. Therefore, he is free to appropriate the language and moral vision of the Old Testament for his Christian readers, whether they are converts from Judaism or Gentiles. . . . There could be no greater unity drawn between the Old Testament’s religion and Christianity than the integral involvement of Christ in both. It was the preexistent Spirit of Christ, of this crucified Messiah, who inspired Israel’s ancient prophets. And it is the Holy Spirit of God who preaches the Christian gospel through evangelists. Christian belief is not a new religion prompted by a new spirit, but of one piece with God’s redemptive work begun through the chosen people, Israel.²⁰

Preaching from 1 Peter

Preaching from 1 Peter is a pastor’s delight! Whether one chooses to work verse by verse through the letter or opts to speak more topically, 1 Peter is an almost endless reservoir of theological, ethical, and pastoral riches that will nourish God’s people until Christ returns. Peter’s richly variegated imagery will reach many people more easily than straightforward prose would. For example, he describes our future inheritance as “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Pet. 1:4) and our faith as being purified of dross like gold is purified by fire (1:7). Christ is like a “lamb without blemish or spot” (1:19). Our new birth is by means of the implanting of an imperishable “seed,” which is the “living and abiding word of God” (1:23). God tastes good (2:3)! The “pure spiritual milk” of the Word enables us to grow up into salvation (2:2).

Peter’s imagery in chapter 2 is especially vivid, bringing alive the truth of our identity as God’s people: we are like “living stones” in a “spiritual house” (2:5), “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (2:9). Jesus is himself the “Shepherd and Overseer” of our souls (2:25). Numerous other examples could be cited.

The letter also contains an abundance of short, pithy statements that could stand alone as topics for instruction: “You believe in him and rejoice with joy that

¹⁹ Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 303.

²⁰ Ibid., 304.

is inexpressible and filled with glory” (1:8); “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1:16); “Your faith and hope are in God” (1:21); “If indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good” (2:3); we exist to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9); we are to “honor everyone” and “love the brotherhood” and “fear God” and “honor the emperor” (2:17). Such densely packed theological declarations continue throughout the letter.

Interpretive Challenges

There are numerous perplexing passages in 1 Peter, but none quite like what we encounter in 1 Peter 3:18–22. This notoriously difficult text requires careful analysis of grammar and syntax, its relationship to the OT, and our theology of death and the afterlife. Because of its complexity and the theological disputes that arise out of it, more space will be devoted to its exposition and interpretation than to any other paragraph in the letter.

Outline

- I. Opening Salutation (1:1–2)
 - A. The Author (1:1a)
 - B. The Recipients (1:1b–2)
- II. The Identity of the People of God (1:3–2:10)
 - A. God’s Mercy and Our Salvation (1:3–12)
 - 1. Salvation Brings Hope (1:3–5)
 - 2. Salvation Brings Joy (1:6–9)
 - 3. Salvation Brings Privilege (1:10–12)
 - B. Holiness as Our Way of Life (1:13–2:3)
 - 1. Imitating God (1:13–16)
 - 2. Fearing God (1:17–21)
 - 3. Loving One Another (1:22–25)
 - 4. Nourished by the Word (2:1–3)
 - C. A Holy Priesthood (2:4–10)
 - 1. Offering Spiritual Sacrifices (2:4–5)
 - 2. Centered in Christ (2:6–8)
 - 3. Chosen to Proclaim God’s Excellencies (2:9–10)
- III. The Spiritual and Moral Life of the People of God (2:11–4:11)
 - A. Abstaining from the Passions of the Flesh (2:11–12)
 - 1. Negatively Stated (2:11)
 - 2. Positively Stated (2:12)
 - B. Submission to Authority as a Way of Life (2:13–3:12)
 - 1. Submission of All to the Governing Authorities (2:13–17)
 - 2. Submission of Servants to Their Masters (2:18–25)
 - a. The Admonition (2:18–20)
 - b. The Example (2:21–25)

3. Submission of Wives to Their Husbands (3:1–6)
 - a. The Admonition (3:1–4)
 - b. The Example (3:5–6)
4. The Honoring of Wives by Their Husbands (3:7)
5. Mutual Respect and Love for All (3:8–12)
- C. Being Zealous for Good in All Things and the Promised Vindication (3:13–4:6)
 1. Suffering for Doing Good (3:13–17)
 2. The Victory and Vindication of Christ (3:18–22)
 3. The Victory and Vindication of Christians (4:1–6)
 - a. The Example of Christ (4:1–2)
 - b. Your Former Lifestyle (4:3)
 - c. The Future Judgment (4:4–6)
- D. Love, Hospitality, and Service (4:7–11)
 1. Pray for One Another (4:7)
 2. Love One Another (4:8)
 3. Be Hospitable to One Another (4:9)
 4. Serve One Another (4:10–11)
- IV. Enduring Trials for the Glory of God (4:12–19)
 - A. Blessed to Suffer for the Glory of God (4:12–14)
 - B. Suffering as a Christian and Not as a Sinner (4:15–19)
- V. The Responsibilities of the Church in the Midst of Trials (5:1–11)
 - A. The Responsibility of Elders for the Flock of God (5:1–4)
 - B. The Responsibility of the Flock of God (5:5–9)
 1. Be Humble (5:5–7)
 2. Resist the Devil (5:8–9)
 - C. The Promise of God and the Praise of God (5:10–11)
 1. The Promise of God (5:10)
 2. The Praise of God (5:11)
- VI. Concluding Remarks (5:12–14)
 - A. The Purpose of the Letter (5:12)
 - B. Final Greetings (5:13–14)

1 PETER 1:1–12

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ,
 To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, ²according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood:

May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

¹⁰Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹inquiring what person or time¹ the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.

¹Or *what time or circumstances*

Section Overview

As is typical of so many NT letters, in 1 Peter the author begins by identifying both himself and his audience, and he also provides a brief explanation of their identity as the elect people of God. Central to their ability to live upright and godly in a world that seeks to oppress God's people is the reminder of the glorious salvation that flows from God's mercy in Christ, with a focus on both its temporal and its eternal benefits. Amid intermittent but severe persecution, these believers are here reassured that their hope is secure because of God's "great mercy" (1 Pet. 1:3) to them in Christ. Although oppressed and stressed, believers must remember that God has committed himself to guard them through faith for final salvation.

In God's providence, the harsh trials we endure serve to intensify and deepen our love for Christ and our joyful delight in him. This salvation is indeed a glorious privilege, one that was made known by prophets of old and into which even the angels long to look.

Section Outline

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 - 2. Salvation Brings Joy (1:6–9)
 - 3. Salvation Brings Privilege (1:10–12)

Comment

1:1–2 As is typical of most NT letters, Peter begins by identifying himself as an “apostle of Jesus Christ.” The genitive “of Jesus Christ” is probably one of possession, although the idea of being sent or commissioned by Jesus may also be present. Peter is one of Christ's apostles in the same way the other eleven are (Matthias having replaced Judas Iscariot): he is fully authorized to speak on Christ's behalf and to act as his emissary or representative. Others called “apostles” in the NT operate at a lower level of spiritual authority (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25; perhaps Rom. 16:7).

The recipients of the letter are identified as “elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,” which together constitute what we know as modern-day Turkey. The land encompassed by these provinces is massive: nearly 135,000 square miles (350,000 sq. km), roughly the equivalent of the states of New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio combined.

The Greek term translated “elect” is used 22 times in the NT, twice in our letter with reference to Jesus himself (1 Pet. 2:4, 6; cf. Luke 23:35). In 17 of these 22 instances the word is used of men and women as God's “elect,” those chosen to inherit eternal life (Matt. 22:14; 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7; Rom. 8:33; Col. 3:12; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:9; 2 John 1, 13; Rev. 17:14).

The objects of God's sovereign selection are specifically identified as “exiles” or “sojourners” or “aliens” (cf. 1 Pet. 1:17 and 2:11). The question is whether Peter intends by this word to explain who the elect are—namely, strangers or aliens scattered throughout the diverse locations noted above—or whether he intends to describe which type of exiles he is addressing—i.e., the “elect” ones. Either option is possible, with the likelihood being the latter. Whatever else may be said of these believers, their foundational and defining identity is that of being “elect exiles” of God's saving grace.

Some scholars insist that this terminology refers to the political and social status of Peter's audience.²¹ On this view, they were literally *foreigners* in the lands in which they lived. They lacked citizenship and the rights that came with it. They probably lived on the fringes of society, disenfranchised, suffering both economic and political oppression. Others believe that Peter is describing not so much their *social standing* but their *spiritual condition*. Christians, whether in Pontus in the first century or Paris in the twenty-first, are God's pilgrim people, sojourners on the earth. Followers of Jesus, whether in Galatia or Germany, Bithynia or Bosnia, are aliens in this world, displaced from their true home, which is the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city God has prepared for those who love him. We are but resident aliens on this earth (cf. esp. Heb. 11:13–16).²²

At first glance, to speak of “elect exiles” seems like a contradiction in terms. To be an exile is to be *rejected*. To be elect is to be *selected*. But there is no contradiction here. God's people are rejected by this world precisely because they have been elected by God. God made them exiles in the earth, resident aliens, when he chose them out of the world for himself and destined them for an eternal and heavenly inheritance. Although they are currently in exile, socially marginalized, on the fringes of society, exposed to hostile powers, they are God's chosen ones and destined for eternal and heavenly glory.

Three prepositional phrases further qualify the nature and purpose of God's sovereign choice of men and women. First, people are elect “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2; cf. Eph. 1:4; 2 Tim. 1:9; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). “Foreknowledge” does not imply that God merely observes the elect or is aware of their existence or has information concerning their lives. Nor does it mean that God simply predicts our conversion or knows about it in advance. Often in Scripture, to *know* has a meaning beyond that of mere cognition. It is used in a sense practically synonymous with “to love,” “to set regard upon,” “to know with peculiar interest, delight, affection, and action” (cf. Gen. 18:19; Ex. 2:25; Pss. 1:6; 144:3; Jer. 1:5; Hos. 13:5; Amos 3:2; Matt. 7:23; 1 Cor. 8:3; Gal. 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:19; 1 John 3:1). Thus, to *foreknow* is to *forelove*. That God foreknew us means that he set his gracious and merciful regard upon us, that he knew us from eternity past with a sovereign and distinguishing delight. God's foreknowledge is an active, creative work of divine love. It is not bare pre-vision that merely recognizes a difference between those who believe and those who do not believe. God's foreknowledge creates that difference!

Here Peter asserts that we are elect “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Pet. 1:2). Most agree that the preposition *kata* (translated “according to”) has the sense of “in conformity with.” In other words, God's foreknowledge or eternal love of us was the standard or norm in light of which his electing act was undertaken.

21 The most vocal advocate of this view is John H. Elliott, *1 Peter: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

22 On this theme, see Karen Jobes, *Letters to the Church*, 288.

Second, this election by God was “in the sanctification of the Spirit” (v. 2b). The preposition “in” is instrumental, as the Spirit is himself the one who sanctifies. “Sanctification” is a fluid word in the NT, here referring to the initial act of God the Spirit by which we are set apart unto the Father as his own, consecrated and claimed to be holy. Peter has in view that inaugural separation from all others so that we might be exclusively his, owned by the one who chose us (Acts 20:32; 26:18; 1 Cor. 1:2, 30; 6:11; 2 Thess. 2:13).²³

Third and finally, the purpose of election (reflecting the force of the preposition *eis*, “for the purpose of”) is “obedience to Jesus Christ” and “sprinkling with his blood” (the single preposition governs both nouns, “obedience” and “sprinkling”). Thus this sovereign act of the Father in foreknowing and electing us, and the Spirit’s work in setting us apart to himself, have as their aim or purpose or goal our obedience to Christ and our sprinkling with his blood.

The background for this statement is Exodus 24:3–8, in which Moses initiates the children of Israel into covenant with God. When the Israelites promised to obey all that the Lord commanded, Moses sprinkled sacrificial blood on them, signifying God’s gracious acceptance of them into the covenant and their obligation to be faithful and obedient to him. Peter seems to be saying that just as the Israelites pledged their obedience (Ex. 24:3, 7) and were sprinkled with the blood of the sacrifice (Ex. 24:8) in order to inaugurate them into the old covenant, so also we pledge obedience to God as the blood of Christ is applied to effect our entrance into the new covenant.

Peter’s prayer for “grace and peace” to be “multiplied” to them is more than a formal, literary convention. The grace of God is not merely his kindly and undeserved favor but also his power and presence, through his Spirit, operative and active in the lives of his people. The “peace” for which Peter prays is likewise an experiential sense of well-being and spiritual tranquility that ought to characterize all of God’s children (cf. Phil. 4:7).

Response

Peter desires his readers to understand that their fundamental identity is found in God, not in culture or a human relationship. Christians are those who are chosen, the elect of God. Election is rooted in eternity past in the Father’s choice, it accounts for how we came to be God’s unique and peculiar possession through the consecration of the Spirit, and it seeks as its goal our obedience to Jesus. All three persons of the Trinity are involved: Father, Spirit, and Son.

It is significant that at the beginning of Peter’s letter to hurting, persecuted, and oppressed people facing myriad trials, he focuses on election. God’s eternal purpose for, in, and through us is the only thing that will ultimately sustain us in hard times. Knowing who and whose we are as God’s elect is a truth the Spirit

²³ In addition, sanctification can refer to the ongoing work of the Spirit by which we are changed and conformed to the moral image of Christ (Rom. 8:13; 2 Cor. 3:18; 7:1; 1 Thess. 5:23; Heb. 12:10, 14) and to that final act of God whereby he makes his people completely holy (Eph. 5:25–27).

will repeatedly bring to mind to encourage us in times of affliction, to strengthen our wills when tempted, and to sustain hope when everything appears to be falling apart.

Yes, we are aliens and sojourners on this earth; the language and values and customs of this world feel foreign to us. But we are more than exiles. We are elect exiles, the chosen people of God. Our core identity is as God's elect, members of his spiritual family, the church. This truth must be established in our hearts. God wants us to know that none of the hardships or disappointments we face as exiles in the earth are a surprise to him. Dwell on this majestic truth. Let it sink deeply into your soul. God has chosen you. The Spirit has set you apart for his unique and beloved possession. And your life has been designed for obedience to Jesus.

Comment

1:3–5 Peter will soon refer to the suffering his readers are experiencing, how they are “grieved by various trials” (1:6), are being slandered by unbelievers (2:12), and are enduring sorrow and “suffering unjustly” (2:19). In 4:12 he mentions the “fiery trial” that many of them have endured. But such a somber theme is no obstacle to heartfelt and exuberant praise of God, as Peter declares, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This doxological explosion is found in slightly different terms again in 4:11 (“To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”) and 5:11 (“To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”).

In 1:6 Peter will reassure his readers that “in this” they rejoice, “though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials.” The antecedent to “this” is the salvation and hope that come to us by God's mercy in Christ, as portrayed in verses 3–5. Thus, it is our salvation, our hope, our inheritance “kept in heaven” (v. 4b) for us that serves as a fountain and reservoir of deep delight in God in order to sustain and strengthen the Christian soul when everything else threatens to destroy us.

Our new birth unto faith in Christ is the fruit of God's “great mercy” (v. 3). Whereas grace contemplates sinners as *guilty*, mercy contemplates them as *miserable*. Mercy is the response of the divine heart to us when the results of our sin and corruption are seen: we are pitiable, pathetic, helpless to extricate ourselves from the condition into which sin has plunged us.

New birth is more than moral reformation or the mere exchange of one set of habits for another. In regeneration (cf. *anagennaō*; v. 3) there is a supernatural, efficacious, and altogether mysterious work of the Holy Spirit that occurs beneath and prior to all positive human response to the gospel. The point of describing salvation in terms of a merciful “divine begetting” is to highlight the initiative of God in making alive or giving birth to that which was either dead or nonexistent (cf. John 1:13; Eph. 2:1–4; 2 Cor. 4:6).

This divine begetting of life in the elect results in the precious gift of a “living hope” (1 Pet. 1:3). Hope is full assurance, not uncertain desire. Hope is unshakable confidence that what God has said he will do, he will do. It is the full assurance

or strong confidence that God will do good to us in the future as he fulfills his every promise.

Peter describes our hope as “living.” This should be contrasted with the dead, lifeless, ultimately futile hope found in the world at large (cf. Eph. 2:12; 1 Thess. 4:13). Our hope is living in the sense that it is productive and fruitful and fertile; ours is a hope that has the power to change how we live. It is alive because its focus and object is real and unchanging and true and rock-solid.

This hope is ours “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3b). Later Peter will make clear that we are born again unto this living hope “through the living and abiding word of God” (v. 23), which is the “good news that was preached” to us (v. 25; cf. 1 Cor. 15:3–4). We have good reason to believe that Christ’s death for us was sufficient in making satisfaction and atonement for our sin because God raised him from the dead.

This hope is the confident assurance that we have an inheritance kept and preserved for us in heaven, not subject to the corrupting and corrosive influence of things on this earth. In the OT, the promised inheritance was typically defined in terms of the land God had pledged to Abraham and his seed. This hope is still in many ways physical, as it is wrapped up in the new heavens and new earth and the city of God, the new Jerusalem. But it greatly transcends any inheritance possible in this life. It is “imperishable” (*aphtharton*), “undefiled” (*amianton*), and “unfading” (*amaranton*). Everything we know in this life eventually dies, is defiled, or loses its capacity to captivate and enthrall. Each of these terms, on the other hand, reassures us that the hope reserved for us in heaven will never fail us in this way.

Peter declares that God’s power (1 Pet. 1:5), working through and sustaining our faith, is the guarantee that what he has promised will assuredly be ours. It is precisely “through” our faith that God keeps us secure. God’s power protects us from any loss of faith or any unbelief that might threaten our inheritance. The only thing that could keep us from heaven would be our forsaking our faith in Christ, turning to other hopes, other treasures. So, to protect us, God prevents that from happening. He inspires and nourishes and strengthens and builds our faith. In doing so, he secures us against the only thing that could destroy us: unbelief, lack of trust in God.

1:6–7 As noted earlier, the antecedent of “this” (v. 6) in which Peter grounds the believer’s joy is the merciful work of God by which we have been saved (vv. 3–5). Whereas we may be tempted to think that suffering and grief preclude joy, Peter says otherwise. Indeed, there are in verses 6–7 two additional reasons to rejoice in suffering. Peter speaks first of the duration of our suffering: it is “for a little while” (v. 6a). When compared to eternity, the time of suffering now will always be short. Compared to an inheritance that is “imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for [us],” our present suffering is only for a little while (v. 4; cf. Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

Some contend that the verb *agallias* (“you rejoice”) is a futuristic present focusing on the joy to be ours in the eschaton. But Peter’s point is that such joy is a present reality in spite of the suffering God’s people are now enduring, in anticipation of eschatological blessings still to come. The same verb is used elsewhere in the NT for rejoicing now (Matt. 5:12; Luke 1:47; John 8:56; Acts 2:26; Rev. 19:7), and the same form occurs yet again in verse 8 with emphasis on our joy in Christ in the present.

“If necessary” (1 Pet. 1:6) reminds us that Christians endure distress only if God wills it (cf. 3:17; 4:19). We might suffer for doing what is right, or we might not. The sovereign will of God governs all of the distresses that befall us, and therefore their design is ultimately not of evil men or Satan but of God.

But why would God deem it necessary to allow suffering in our lives? The answer is found in 1:7: “so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” God’s intention is for our troubles and trials to refine the genuineness of our faith just as fire refines gold, so that when Christ returns, the quality of our faith may win praise and glory and honor. Approved faith is said to be more valuable than gold because gold is temporary and will ultimately be destroyed. Yet faith is also compared with gold because both are refined and purified of their dross and alloy by fire (cf. Ps. 66:10; Isa. 48:10; Mal. 3:3).

When Jesus appears in glory (here *apokalypsei* is used of his second advent), two things will take place. First, his glory will be magnificently reflected in the mirror of our faith. He will be the trusted one and the hoped-for one and the rejoiced-in one. Thus his glory will shine in our faith and hope and joy. The more pure and refined the gold of our faith is, the more clearly his beauty and worth will be reflected.

Second, since God exalts all that exalts him, he will give praise and honor and glory to our faith. He will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” He will give us (as Peter says in 5:4) the “unfading crown of glory” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5).

1:8 If we follow the logic of Peter’s thought in verses 6–7, we discover that verse 8 describes what is left of Christian faith after it has passed through the furnace of afflictions. In other words, verse 8 is Peter’s portrayal of the end product of persecution and pain. This is Christian experience in its purest and most pristine form. Peter has no illusions of perfection, but he does envision a relationship with Jesus absent the peripheral elements.

When Peter speaks of loving Jesus, he refers to unashamed, extravagant affection for the Son of God. One need not see Jesus in the flesh to experience unbridled passion for him. Rather, we see him in the revelation of God’s Word, and the Spirit quickens in our hearts and souls a passionate affection for him that is undeniable and unquenchable.

Second, such faith involves trusting Jesus. “Believe” in verse 8 means more than giving mental assent to doctrinal truths about Jesus. It certainly includes such

assent, but it also requires yielding to him, relying on him moment by moment, entrusting one's soul to him, and turning to him at all times for strength and encouragement and hope.

Third, this faith includes enjoying Jesus. The end product of a faith that has been purged and purified is a joy that is "inexpressible" and "filled with glory" (v. 8). This is not to say that joy is absent prior to the onset of trials. We are responsible to "rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16)—before, during, and after hardship. Peter's point is simply that the quality and sincerity and fervency of joy are both refined and intensified by trials. Far from being secondary or something to suppress and avoid, joy is described here as that which characterizes Christian experience in its highest and most sanctified form.

Peter describes this joy as inexpressible or unutterable, a joy so profound that it is beyond mere words. It is ineffable, all-consuming, overwhelming, speechless joy! This joy defies all human efforts at understanding or explanation.

This joy is also "filled with glory." This word evokes images of God's glory in the OT, of the bright, shining radiance of his presence. The "glory" here may also refer to the glory of the coming age, when our salvation is consummated and we enter into the fullness of our relationship with Christ. But even now, in the present, though we do not see Jesus, we experience something in advance of the great and indescribable glory of that coming day. The future glory has broken into the present and has changed us forever.

1:9 This vital and vibrant faith in Christ will be consummated in the fullness of salvation at the second coming of our Savior. The participle "obtaining" is likely causal, as the joy we experience in the present is based in large measure on the certainty of our final salvation. Peter's use of "souls" (*psychōn*) does not suggest a body-soul dualism, as if only the immaterial dimension of our being will be saved. He uses the word "soul" on several occasions in the letter (1:22; 2:11, 25; 3:20; 4:19), twice with reference to the entire person (3:20; 4:19).

1:10–12 Concerning "this salvation" (as promised in v. 9), Peter articulates several truths. First, the Holy Spirit,²⁴ operating through OT prophets, made it known well in advance (vv. 10–11). The saving grace of God in Christ was not an afterthought or a reaction to unforeseen developments. Rather, it was purposed and prophesied in the OT Scriptures. Second, this salvation can be summed up in one word: "grace," here an umbrella term encompassing all that God has done for us in Christ (v. 10). It consists, from beginning to end, in the display of God's merciful favor to hell-deserving sinners. Third, this salvation is made possible only by the "sufferings of Christ" (v. 11b). The preposition *eis* likely has the sense of destination: "the sufferings *destined for*" or "that were *to come upon*" Christ. These sufferings are followed by "glories" (an unusual use of the plural in the NT), namely, the resurrection, ascension, and exaltation of Christ to the right hand of the Father.

²⁴ The phrase "Spirit of Christ" (v. 11) is found elsewhere in the NT in Romans 8:9 (in Acts 16:7 it is "the Spirit of Jesus"; cf. 2 Pet. 1:21).

The glory of this salvation is revealed yet again in the intense curiosity and interest of the very prophets who foretold its advent. God made it clear to them (note the divine passive:²⁵ “it was revealed” *by God*) that in speaking prophetically of what was yet to come, they were serving us, not themselves. Finally, this salvation, far from being some ancient, esoteric, or irrelevant word pointing to something embarrassing, is so marvelous and majestic that even the angels of heaven long to look into and understand it (v. 12). Whereas it may be that Peter is referring to angelic ignorance and thus their curiosity concerning the nature of our salvation, the infinitive “to look” (*parakypsai*) may instead point to their eagerness for its fulfillment.

Response

If there is one thing that characterizes the pagan world, it is hopelessness. Christians, on the other hand, are a people whose future has been secured by the saving grace of God, through the resurrection of Jesus. God’s promise is an unshakable ground of assurance for our souls: no matter the struggles, setbacks, and disappointments we face, his power will guard us and keep our faith alive until the day when our earthly sojourn gives way to the enjoyment of our heavenly inheritance.

For those who know Christ, suffering is far from senseless or discouraging; it is, rather, an expression of God’s love, a divinely orchestrated test that purifies our faith in preparation for the return of Jesus. As distressing as life may often be, this tested-as-though-by-fire faith enables us to love Christ even in his physical absence and to experience the blessings of a joy so deep that words fail to account for it. It might even be said that the mark of genuine Christian growth and spiritual maturity is the capacity to suffer well. Few will testify to having learned much during seasons of prosperity, but many will point to the testing of their faith as the occasion in which they grew in greater conformity to the image of Jesus.

1 PETER 1:13–2:3

¹³Therefore, preparing your minds for action,¹ and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ¹⁴As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, ¹⁵but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, ¹⁶since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” ¹⁷And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout

²⁵ “Divine passive” refers to the use of the passive voice with the implied subject being God.

the time of your exile, ¹⁸knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. ²⁰He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you ²¹who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

²²Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ²⁴for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,

²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

2 So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

¹Greek *girding up the loins of your mind*

Section Overview

What accounts for the differences that ought to be observable between the unbelieving world and the church of Jesus Christ? Here Peter answers this question. Christians have been ransomed out of the darkness and condemnation of sin and guilt and are both called and empowered to live in conformity with the very character of God himself. We live in the strength of a new life imparted to us through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus our relationships must forever be transformed as we live not only in reverent fear of God but also in self-sacrificial love for one another.

Section Outline

II.B. Holiness as Our Way of Life (1:13–2:3)

1. Imitating God (1:13–16)
2. Fearing God (1:17–21)
3. Loving One Another (1:22–25)
4. Nourished by the Word (2:1–3)

Comment

1:13–16 In the first twelve verses of 1 Peter (which in the Greek text is one long sentence), there is not a single command: no imperatives, admonitions, or exhortations. There is nothing but glorious affirmations and declarations of the saving grace of God in Christ. Thus to this point Peter has focused exclusively on what

God has done. But in verses 13–16 he turns his attention to the moral and ethical responsibilities we must embrace as children of God.

The transitional conjunction “therefore” that begins verse 13 is crucial. This word tells us that all of Peter’s forthcoming exhortations depend on the grace he has been expounding in verses 1–12. *The call to obedience and holiness is thus rooted in the realities of grace* (our new election, our new birth, an incorruptible inheritance, etc.). The imperative is always based on the indicative. We must never reverse the order. Otherwise, we fall into legalism and works-righteousness.

The two participles in verse 13, translated “preparing your minds” and “being sober-minded,” are, technically speaking, participles of attendant circumstance and should be understood along the lines of, “as/while you are preparing your minds” and “as/while you are sober-minded.” However, both are also dependent on the imperative “set your hope” and thus are themselves imperatival in force: “Prepare your minds for action and be sober-minded.”

In ancient times, men wore loose-fitting, free-flowing garments that, although graceful and dignified in appearance, were a hindrance to rigorous activity such as running or working. Thus it was often necessary to gather up one’s garment and tuck it into the belt so as to leave the legs free to move (cf. 1 Kings 18:46). Hence, “preparing” or “girding up the loins” of one’s mind (cf. 1 Pet. 1:13 ESV mg.) finds its modern equivalent in “rolling up your sleeves.”

“Sober-mindedness” demands avoidance of mental intoxication. Here the word is used metaphorically, but with the notion of the intoxicating effects of alcohol very much in the forefront of the point. The term denotes mental alertness and self-control and disciplined attention.

The first formal imperative is to “set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13). We are to devote every ounce of mental and spiritual and emotional energy to contemplating and concentrating on the grace that is to come. Such “grace” is, of course, the consummation of the blessings of salvation outlined in verses 1–12.

Given our new identity and status as “obedient children” (v. 14), we are exhorted to holiness of life. This call to holiness has two sides, one negative and one positive. *Negatively*, we are not to be conformed to the “passions of your former ignorance” (v. 14). *Positively*, we are to “be holy as God is holy” (cf. vv. 15–16, in keeping with Lev. 11:44, although Carson²⁶ believes the citation is from Lev. 19:2; cf. also 20:7–8, 26).

Our way of life before we became followers of Jesus was governed by our “ignorance.” This ignorance of God’s beauty and his gracious intent in Christ is what gave rise to the lusts and sinful desires and habits that kept us in bondage.

The root meaning of the Hebrew noun “holiness” and the adjective “holy” comes from a word meaning to “cut” or “separate.” The Greek equivalent is *hagios* and its derivatives. It conveys the truth that God is separate from everyone and everything else. He alone is Creator. He is altogether and wholly other, in both his character and his deeds. He is *transcendently different* from and greater than all

²⁶ Carson, “1 Peter,” 1017.

his creatures in every conceivable respect. Holiness, then, is not solely a reference to moral or ethical purity. It also entails transcendent and unparalleled beauty.

By this Peter does not mean that we are to strive to be utterly unique in the universe, without rival or parallel. He is not calling us to aspire to be transcendently beautiful or in another class altogether. The key to understanding his command is found in comparing verses 14 and 15. To live holy as God is holy requires separating ourselves from those sinful “passions” that characterized our lives before we came to know Christ. It means distancing ourselves from the lifestyle that used to dominate our existence. It means cutting ourselves off from whatever will desensitize us to sin or blur our spiritual vision or stir up our sinful nature.

1:17 The call to holiness in verses 13–16 is now repeated in slightly different terms, as Peter urges his readers to “conduct” (*anastrophēte*) themselves in a manner suitable to their relationship to God as Father. To “call on” (*epikaleō*) God as Father is more than simply to name him as such; it carries the notion of invoking or calling on him in prayer. Paul “called” on God to bear witness to the integrity of his behavior (2 Cor. 1:23) and also made an “appeal” (*epikaloumai*) to Caesar to vindicate his rights as a citizen (Acts 25:11–12; cf. also Acts 25:21).

The term used to describe God as the one who judges “impartially” (*aprosōpolēmpṭōs*) occurs only here in the NT and points to action taken without regard to rank, status, or privilege. The cognate noun *prosōpolēmpsia* occurs in Romans 2:11 and Ephesians 6:9 with a similar focus on God’s impartiality (cf. Acts 10:34). The same point is made later in 1 Peter 2:23, where God is described as the one who “judges justly.”

The standard for God’s judgment are the “works” of each individual, a theme seen consistently in both Testaments (Ps. 62:12; Hos. 12:2; Matt. 25:31–46; Rom. 6:2; Rev. 20:12–15). Peter is not saying that our works are the ground or basis of our acceptance; rather, they serve as appropriate criteria of judgment insofar as they reflect and are a visible expression of one’s inward faith commitment (cf. James 2:12–26).

Our primary responsibility is to “conduct” ourselves “with fear” (cf. 1 Pet. 2:17; in 2:18; 3:2, 15 it is translated as “respect”) during the course of our lives on earth. As was noted earlier, in the comment on 1:1, Christians are now in “exile” (*paroikias*), awaiting their true homeland, the new earth. Contrary to those who would argue that Peter uses this language in a political and sociological sense to describe the literal disenfranchisement of believers, the term here seems to have a spiritual focus (although the two understandings are not mutually exclusive): this earth is not our true home, as we are citizens of a heavenly city (cf. Phil. 3:20).

Although it may seem odd for Peter to speak of living in “fear” of one’s “Father” (cf. Gen. 22:12; Job 1:8; Prov. 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:17), he does not mean by this to be afraid or live in doubt or anxiety about one’s relationship to God. The emphasis is on reverence, awe, and an ever-present sense of utter dependency on the Lord’s power and mercy. Thus to “fear” God means to be conscious of his all-pervasive presence

and of our absolute, moment-by-moment dependence on him for light and life, keenly sensitive to our comprehensive responsibility to do all that he has commanded, fearful of offending him, determined to obey him (Deut. 6:1–2, 24; 8:6; Pss. 112:1; 119:63; Mal. 3:5), and committed to loving him (Deut. 10:12, 20; 13:4).

1:18 Here we see yet another reason or ground for the exhortation to conduct ourselves in fear. We do so “knowing” (the participle has a causal force) the source and nature of our being ransomed from sin, by which we are stirred to fear God and conduct ourselves in holiness of life.

To be “ransomed” (*elytrōthēte*, from *lytroō*, to “set free,” “redeem,” or “liberate,” used in this sense only here and in Luke 24:21 and Titus 2:14) refers to a well-known custom in Greco-Roman culture. Slavery in the ancient world was based not on race but on economics. A slave would typically receive his freedom after money was deposited in the temple of a god or goddess and then paid to the slave’s owner. The sum paid for the redemption or ransom was referred to as the “price,” and the slave was considered to have been redeemed by the deity (cf. Mark 10:45).

According to Peter, his readers were in captivity or bondage to the “futile ways inherited from your forefathers.” In other words, they were slaves to the sinful, useless, meaningless way of life that alienated them from God. Peter’s choice of terms confirms that his audience was predominantly Gentile: “The legacy that Peter is denouncing is Greco-Roman paganism and its associated unethical practices.”²⁷

Since “silver” and “gold” are technically not perishable metals, Peter’s use of *phthartos* (“subject to decay, mortal”) suggests he has in mind the contrast between what is transient and what is eternal or enduring. Peter used the adjectival antonym in 1:4 to describe the “imperishable” (*aphtharton*) nature of our eternal inheritance.

1:19 Although silver and gold would be inadequate to redeem us from sin, a price has indeed been paid: “the precious blood of Christ.” The adjective rendered “precious” (*timios*) does not mean cute, sweet, or endearing but rather priceless, costly, of infinite value. And it is precious because of whose blood it is: Christ’s, who was the “lamb without blemish or spot.” To be without blemish, spot, or stain is to lack any and all moral defects. Christ’s sacrifice was acceptable because he was morally and ceremonially perfect (cf. Ex. 12:5; Lev. 1:3–5; 22:17–25; Num. 6:14; 19:2; Heb. 9:14). Thus Peter seems to be saying, “Do not conduct yourself as though the ransom was not precious. The blood of Christ has redeemed you from a useless and meaningless and futile way of life, so do not live your new life as if the ransom price was anything less than glorious and priceless.”

1:20–21 The precious nature of the sacrificial price is emphasized yet again by Peter’s description of Christ as having been “foreknown” (observe the use of the

²⁷ Greg W. Forbes, *1 Peter: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H, 2014), 43. Carson calls for caution here, reminding us that Paul himself described his own Jewish life before conversion “in astonishingly negative categories (Phil. 3:4–9). In short, it is unwise to use Peter’s language to infer too much about his readership” (Carson, “1 Peter,” 1019).

perfect tense) “before [*pro*] the foundation of the world” (cf. similar language in John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; “from” (*apo*) the foundation of the world is more common still, as we see in Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Luke 11:50; Heb. 4:3; 9:26; Rev. 13:8; 17:8). The point is that God’s purpose in ransoming sinners was not an afterthought but was conceived in his heart before time began.

Although planned from eternity past, God’s redemptive purpose came to fruition when Christ “was made manifest” for our sakes “in the last times.” Peter’s use of “last times” (lit., “the end of the ages/times”) is standard NT terminology to indicate the period inaugurated by Christ’s death and resurrection and consummated by his return (1 Pet. 5:4) at the end of history (cf. Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3).

In saying that it is “through him” (i.e., Christ) that we are “believers in God,” Peter affirms that the sacrificial death of Jesus was the foundation and source of every spiritual and saving benefit that comes to those for whom he suffered. This would include the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:32–33) as well as the repentance and saving faith that are themselves the gift of God (Eph. 2:8–10; Acts 11:18).

That the blood of Christ was sufficient to ransom sinners from death and condemnation is demonstrated by God’s having “raised him from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:21b). The ransom Christ paid was vindicated and declared to be of immeasurable worth in achieving the redemption of sinners when God raised Christ to newness of life and “gave him glory” (a reference no doubt to his exaltation to the right hand of God and the subjection of all enemies beneath his feet; cf. 1 Cor. 15:25–28; Eph. 1:20–23; Phil. 3:20–21).

The purpose of this gracious work of redemption is that our “faith and hope” might be in God alone. Jesus Christ has done the necessary work to connect us with God in faith: he was eternally foreknown, manifested in human form, sacrificed on the cross, raised from the dead, and given glory by the Father, and through all of this we come to hope in God.

Thus Peter ends this paragraph precisely where he began. He exhorted us in verse 13 to “set” our “hope fully on the grace that will be brought” to us when Jesus appears. And now he concludes in verse 21 by reminding us that God has done everything necessary in and through Jesus to make it possible for us to put our faith and hope confidently in God alone.

1:22 The perfect participle “having purified” signifies that we are enabled to love one another because our “souls” have been purified. There is some debate concerning when this purification of the soul takes place. This may be a reference to one’s initial reception of the gospel and thus God’s act of consecrating us unto himself (cf. 1:2). However, this would not account for the active voice of the participle. Others believe that Peter envisions a purification subsequent to conversion, not so much as a final attainment at some point in time but as a consistent pattern of behavior, a lifestyle each believer actively embraces through the power of the Spirit.

The important thing to note is that obedience is a right response to truth (lit., “obedience of the truth,” the genitive being objective: the *truth* is what we obey). This “truth” is the Word of God, specifically the gospel that was proclaimed (cf. vv. 23, 25). Thus obeying the truth means believing in the gospel (cf. 2:8; 4:17; 2 Thess. 1:8). It is the Word of God that both produces the new birth in us (cf. 1 Pet. 1:23) and purifies our souls so that we may love one another (v. 22). To “love one another earnestly from a pure heart” (v. 22b) is essentially a restatement of “sincere brotherly love” (v. 22a), both of which emphasize that our love must not be perfunctory or external only. It must be “sincere” and “pure” (some manuscripts omit *katharas*, “pure,” but its inclusion is more likely).

1:23–25 The reason (“since”) our love must be sincere and pure is that we “have been born again, . . . through the living and abiding word of God.” The perfect passive participle of a verb meaning “to beget” or “to give new birth, new life” is clearly causal in force. In 1:3 we were “born again” to a living hope, and here we are “born again” to a sincere love of the brethren. The spiritual nature of the new life thus governs the spiritual nature of how it is lived.

When Peter speaks in verse 23 of the “word of God” and again in verse 25 of the “word of the Lord,” he probably has in mind both the spoken word and the written Word, both preaching and Scripture. We know he has in view the spoken word because he refers to it explicitly in verse 25 as the “good news that was preached to you.” But he also has in mind the written Scriptures, as seen in his citation of Isaiah 40:6–8 (cf. 2 Pet. 1:19–21; 3:15–16).

Peter is clearly fond of the language of perishable/imperishable: our inheritance is “imperishable” (*aphtharton*; 1 Pet. 1:4); the silver and gold by which we are *not* ransomed is “perishable” (*phthartois*); the “seed” by which we come into spiritual life is not “perishable” (*phthartēs*) but rather “imperishable” (*aphthartou*). The contrast in each case is between what is ephemeral and transient and what is enduring and eternal.

The instrumental cause of new birth is the “living and abiding word of God,” which likely stands in apposition to the “imperishable” seed. This word is living because it has the power to impart life. It is abiding because the life it imparts is permanent and sustained and never dies. Thus the contrast in verse 24 is not between the word of God and literal grass and flowers. The latter are cited as representative or symbolic of anything transient or impermanent in which we foolishly put our confidence.

The word “through” which we are born again (v. 23) is the gospel. The means that God employs in his work of imparting new and eternal life to the human soul is the word of the gospel that is preached and proclaimed (similarly in James 1:18).

It is difficult (and perhaps unnecessary) to determine whether “Lord” (1 Pet. 1:25a) is a reference to God the Father or to Jesus Christ. The latter is more likely insofar as Jesus is elsewhere described by Peter as “Lord” (1:3; 2:3; 3:15), and the

“good news” (v. 25b) that is preached concerns the person and work of Christ. The genitive “of the Lord” is likely objective: it is the news about or concerning Jesus, although some see a genitive of source, with the reference being to the words Jesus himself spoke and taught (Mark 13:31).

No distinction should be made between the “word” (*logos*) of God in 1 Peter 1:23 and the “word” (*rhēma*) in verse 25 (2x). Whereas on occasion *rhēma* refers to specific spoken utterances while *logos* has in view a collection of written truths, here they are undoubtedly synonymous and interchangeable.

2:1²⁸ Peter continues in an unbroken train of thought by summing up the essential elements of a life of holiness. He lists five attitudes and actions undeniably inconsistent with a life devoted to the sort of “brotherly love” (1:22) to which he has called believers (that 2:1–3 is thus connected with 1:22–25 is evident from the transitional conjunction “so” or “therefore”). He tells his readers that such attitudes and actions must be “put away” (2:1a), a verb often used of disrobing or removing garments (cf. Rom. 13:12; Eph. 4:22, 25; Heb. 12:1; James 1:21). We are to put aside or strip off old sinful habits like a set of tattered, worn-out clothes.

The first filthy garment to put away is “malice” (*kakian*), which may well be the source of the remaining four vices. They are the evil fruit of this rotten tree, the bitter waters from this wicked well. But neither “malice” nor “envy” (*phthonous*) feels like a choice. Yet Peter is clearly instructing us to stop being angry, to cease feeling wrath, to terminate malicious thoughts, and to stop feeling envious of others. He evidently believes that we are responsible before God, through the power of the indwelling Spirit, to do whatever is necessary to eliminate these affections and emotions from our souls.

Second, we are to put away “all deceit.” This is Peter’s way of saying the same thing Paul says in Colossians 3:9, where he commands the Christians in Colossae, “Do not lie to one another” (Col. 3:9a). Paul goes a step beyond Peter by adding the phrase “to one another,” highlighting the urgency of this imperative within the Christian community.

We are also to put away “hypocrisy” (the opposite of that which is “sincere”; 1 Pet. 1:22), “envy,” and “slander.” “Envy” (*phthonous*) points to a desire for or resentment of some privilege or benefit that belongs to another. Envy is the fruit of dissatisfaction with God. If God were truly enough for us, we would not feel the need to have what others enjoy.

“Slander” (*katalalias*) is most often motivated by the desire for revenge and self-enhancement, often driven by a longing to deflect attention from our own failings. By shining light on someone else through slander, we may be able to deflect attention from our own darkness.

²⁸ The Greek NT was not originally written with the verse and chapter divisions of our English translations. These were added later by scribes and religious scholars to aid in the reading of the biblical text, but they are not always helpful. This is nowhere better seen than in the unfortunate division between chapters 1 and 2 of 1 Peter. Although all English versions follow the division we find in the ESV, our treatment of the text will include 2:1–3 as the concluding paragraph to the focus begun in 1:13.

2:2–3 Finally, we must see the connection between these negative vices in verse 1 and what follows in verses 2–3. If we seek to experience ever-increasing desire for God’s Word and to taste more fully his kindness, we must realize that, as our satisfaction in God’s kindness rises, the desires of malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander are destroyed. And the inverse is true as well: as we resist these temptations and lay them aside, desire for God grows stronger and more intense.

Such is the only appropriate response of those who, having been born again (1:3, 23), are God’s “newborn infants.” The latter is not a pejorative insult, as if Peter were accusing his readers of failing to grow up in Christ. The word *brephos* (“infant”) applies to all Christians at every stage of spiritual development. It is a term of endearment denoting the intimacy of our relationship with God as Father.

“Milk” is not a reference to the low-level introductory teachings of the faith (in contrast to the “milk” vs. “solid food” distinction in Heb. 5:12–14). Here it points to the entirety of God’s revelation to us and is modified by two words: *logikon* and *adolon*—spiritual and pure, respectively. The former, *logikon*, used by Paul in Romans 12:1 to describe the nature of our worship, means something along the lines of “reasonable,” “rational,” “in accordance with reality” (cf. ESV mg.). The latter, *adolon* (*adolos*), has the sense of “uncontaminated” or “pure,” standing in obvious contrast with “deceit” (*dolos*) in verse 1. Thus we are to desire or long for the unadulterated and pristine truth of God’s Word. It alone enables growth into the “salvation” we have already received and that we will yet experience in its consummate expression (1 Pet. 1:9).

Although we might have expected *eiper* (“since”; found in a few manuscripts) at the beginning of verse 3, *ei* is more strongly attested. Peter does not question whether his readers have genuinely “tasted” the goodness of the Lord (an obvious allusion to Ps. 34:8), thus justifying the translation “if *indeed*.”

An interesting play on words is found in the use of *chrēstos* (“good,” “kind”), which when pronounced sounds almost identical to *christos* (“Christ”), which likely explains why a few manuscripts contain the latter instead of the former. In sum, the initial tasting and savoring of the goodness and sweetness of the grace of God in Jesus is the motivation for the ongoing pursuit of greater nourishment in the knowledge of him through the Word of God.

Response

We live in a day in which the proclamation and explanation of the truths in God’s written Word are set aside in favor of film, skits, or other expressions of popular media and culture. But we must vigorously resist this trend. Souls are at stake! Eternal life is imparted to hell-deserving sinners by means of the *preached* Word of the good news of what God has done for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is simply no substitute for the exposition and application of God’s Word. Churches may increase in attendance without it, but souls will not be saved by any other means.

Of course, the Word of God does more than save souls; it also sanctifies them. One could easily feel overwhelmed and altogether inadequate to respond to the numerous ethical injunctions in this paragraph were it not for the transformative and energizing power that comes from daily ingestion of God's revealed truth. We can truly fear God and genuinely love one another only as our hearts are instructed and nourished by the life-giving, soul-changing Word of God.

1 PETER 2:4–10

⁴As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, ⁵you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

⁷So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,”¹

⁸and

“A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offense.”

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

¹Greek *the head of the corner*

Section Overview

This passage includes what may be the most insightful and encouraging portrayal of the identity and purpose of the people of God anywhere in the NT. The NT church, says Peter, is the true Israel of God! The NT church is the continuation and maturation of the believing remnant of God's old covenant people. The titles, honors, privileges, and responsibilities predicated of Israel of old are here applied

without qualification to the new covenant people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. The church exists for many reasons, but none more important or urgent than to proclaim and make known, verbally and visibly, the excellencies and attributes of the greatness and grace of God. As those who once abided in darkness, who were not God's people, we now live in the glorious light of the kingdom of his dear Son, Jesus Christ.

Section Outline

II.C. A Holy Priesthood (2:4–10)

1. Offering Spiritual Sacrifices (2:4–5)
2. Centered in Christ (2:6–8)
3. Chosen to Proclaim God's Excellencies (2:9–10)

Comment

2:4–5 This paragraph is linked closely to what has preceded by the relative pronoun *hon*, the antecedent of which is *ho kyrios* ("the Lord") in verse 3. The participle *proserchomenoi* most likely describes an attendant circumstance: "as you come to him." To describe Jesus as a "living" (*zōnta*) stone is striking, as stones are by nature inert and lifeless. Peter has already referred to our "living hope" (1:3) and the "living" word of God (1:23), and here his focus is on Christ as "living" (that is, risen from the dead). The words "stone" and "cornerstone" are repeatedly applied to Jesus in this passage (2:6, 7, 8) in order to portray him as the foundation of a "spiritual house," the church. This house, the true temple of God, is "living" and thus pulsating with life. It is a vibrant and ever-increasing organic reality that grows with each instance of conversion and expands by the power of the Holy Spirit.

To "come" to Christ, this living stone, likely means to follow him, to believe and trust in him, to put one's hope in him as the sent one of God, unlike those "men" who have "rejected" him (v. 4). The participle "rejected" is concessive: "although" rejected by men, he is "chosen and precious" in the sight of God.

Jesus is preeminently God's chosen or "elect" one and is immeasurably "precious"—valuable, highly honored—in God's sight. That God the Father should prize Jesus in this way suggests that we too should treasure the Son of God above all else (cf. Phil. 3:7–8). Perhaps the most important task of the church, God's temple, is to prize Jesus as precious so that all the world may see him as such (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9–10).

If we are in Christ, the "living stone," then we too are "living stones" (v. 5) of a spiritual house, a temple that God is building. The purpose of God in and through the church is to establish us as a "holy priesthood" (in v. 9, believers are described as a "royal priesthood") whose function is to offer "spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God." Our service and activity as the church is "spiritual" in the sense that, unlike the offerings of the priesthood under the old covenant, in which the blood of bulls and goats was perpetually placed on the altar, we offer a spiritual "sacrifice

of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name” (Heb. 13:15). However, by “spiritual” Peter does not mean immaterial, for our bodies are physical and are themselves to be offered as a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1). In the new covenant, no sacrifice of worship or service is “acceptable” to God unless it comes “through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:5), that is, on the basis of his atoning sacrifice and bodily resurrection.

The body of Christ is the true temple of God’s indwelling presence. The glory of Yahweh now abides permanently and powerfully in us through the Holy Spirit. In language similar to that of Peter, Paul refers to Jesus Christ as the cornerstone “in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Eph. 2:21–22; cf. 1 Cor. 3:16–17; 6:19–20; 2 Cor. 6:16). God’s residence is neither a literal temple in Jerusalem nor simply heaven but encompasses the church, of which all of us who know Jesus are a part.

2:6–8 This is the only occasion in the NT where the word translated “it stands” (present tense of *periechō*) is used to cite an OT text (although it is largely synonymous with the more common perfect tense “it is written” [*gegraptai*]). The citation that follows is from Isaiah 28:16.

The words “chosen and precious” are the same as those found earlier, in 1 Peter 2:4, and again they describe Jesus. The unusual *akrogōniaios* could be translated as “cornerstone” (ESV) or “capstone/keystone.” The former (which is more probable) forms the foundation to a building, while the latter completes it. “Cornerstone” is more likely, as the imagery is of one who stumbles or trips over it (cf. v. 8). This is confirmed by the additional description of Christ as, literally, “the head of the corner” (v. 7).

This is a metaphor, obviously, but one with deep and very personal meaning for everyone. If one finds Jesus precious and thus responds in faith, he is the cornerstone upon which such a person builds his life in community now and is the rock on which that person will stand without shame or disappointment in the ages to come. But if one finds him to be offensive and unappealing and responds to him in disobedience and unbelief, he is the stone over which such a person will stumble and fall, both now and forever.

Several translations render the opening of verse 7 as if Peter were declaring that Jesus is “precious” to us who believe (*hē timē* taken as a predicate nominative). Although Jesus is surely that, Peter’s point is to remind his readers that, although they may suffer shame and disgrace for their obedience to Christ, they are honored and valued by God for their resilient faith and trust. Thus the “honor” belongs to the believer through the grace of God.

The “builders” who rejected Christ as God’s cornerstone for the church, the true temple of God, are the ones who “do not believe” (v. 7a). Christ is “this very one” (most translations fail to observe the emphatic *houtos*, the subject of *egenēthē* [“has become”]) who serves the foundational purpose in God’s work.

The rejection of Christ as the cornerstone, though tragic and devastating for those who do not find him to be “chosen and precious” (v. 4), was not unforeseen and poses no obstacle to God’s purposes for the church. The “word” they “disobey” (v. 8) is the gospel, the same “good news that was preached” to all (1:25).

A more literal rendering of 2:8 would be, “they stumble because they disobey the word, unto which also they were appointed.” There is some dispute over the antecedent of the neuter relative pronoun (*ho*, “which”). Some are disturbed by the suggestion that certain people are “appointed” or “destined” not to believe the gospel, and thus find the antecedent to be “stumbling.” The point would be that “those who disobey the word are destined to stumble”²⁹ but not destined to “disobey.” But the ESV rendering is more likely: that to which “they were destined” is their unbelief.³⁰

Human choices cannot finally destroy the temple of God. Even when someone rejects the chosen and precious stone of Jesus Christ, two things are still true: first, the stone will not be rejected by God but will still hold the place of honor and glory as the chief cornerstone; second, the one who rejects the stone will never be able to boast over God that he frustrated God’s ultimate design for his temple. God triumphs even as some reject him. Unbelievers still make the choice; they choose to disobey because such is their freely chosen desire. Their stumbling is not some inadvertent accident in which they never see the stone and unintentionally trip over it. No, they see it and spurn it. They refuse to cherish and embrace this stone as precious. And for that, they alone are morally accountable.

2:9 Although the adversative *de* is not as strong as other adversatives in the Greek NT, when combined with the emphatic second-person-plural pronoun *hymeis* (“but you”) it is clear that Peter is setting the Christian community in sharp contrast with those who “disobey the word” (v. 8b).

What follows reverberates with OT descriptions of the people of God (cf. esp. Ex. 19:5–6; Deut. 7:6; 14:2; Isa. 43:20–21; Hos. 2:23; cf. also Titus 2:14). Titles, privileges, and blessings formerly reserved for ethnic Israel are now freely applied to the NT church, the true Israel of God (cf. Gal. 6:16). Here in 1 Peter 2:9 are four distinctive truths applicable to all who believe in and build their lives on the chosen and precious cornerstone, Christ (v. 6).

First, the church is a “chosen [*eklekton*; also applied to Jesus, the “chosen” stone, in v. 6] race” (an echo of Isaiah 43:3, 20–21). Irrespective of ethnicity, believers have been united by faith in Jesus to be a new people, a new race. This kind of “race” (*genos*) has nothing to do with ethnicity precisely because this race is composed of every ethnicity. It is a spiritual race, a chosen race, defined not by color or culture but by *creed*. This race is defined by the One in whom we believe: Jesus.

Second, the church is a “royal priesthood.” Although “royal” (*basileion*) could easily be taken as a substantive noun (hence “kingdom”), it is more likely functioning

²⁹ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 66. Elliott is a good representative of this view. See his *1 Peter*, 433–434. So, too, J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 107.

³⁰ For an extremely helpful discussion of the theological implications of this passage, see Grudem, *First Epistle of Peter*, 105–110.

as an adjective modifying “priesthood.” As priests of God, we are not merely the passive building in which God dwells; we are also the active participants in worship. The priests brought the sacrifices into the tabernacle in the OT. But now, that tabernacle is replaced by the Christian church, the atoning altar is replaced by Jesus Christ and his shed blood, and the Levitical priests are replaced by all who believe in Christ. We are a “royal” priesthood because we have come under the dominion of the King of the Universe, the Lord of lords and King of kings. Just as OT Israel was to mediate God’s blessing to the surrounding nations (Gen. 12:3; Ex. 19:6), so the NT church, as priests of God, is to spread his grace and truth to a needy world.

Third, the church is a “holy nation.” No people group can lay claim to being a “holy nation” except the church, those who have been set apart “in the sanctification of the Spirit” (1 Pet. 1:2) for obedience to Jesus.

Fourth, we are a “people for his own possession.” Although God owns everything (Ex. 19:5), he has through Christ obtained for himself (1 Pet. 1:19) a special and uniquely blessed people: those who by grace have believed in Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 6:16).

All of this is true of us so “that” (*hopōs*) we might proclaim God’s excellencies (*aretas*; used in the plural only here in the NT), which encompass God’s moral virtues, his inherent beauty (cf. Ps. 27:4), and his actions in and through Jesus on behalf of those whom he has called unto himself. In fact, the excellencies of God are seen primarily in his having “called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9b).

The “darkness” in which believers once lived is hardly physical in nature; rather, it points to the spiritual ignorance that dominated our lives. We were blind to the beauty and excellency of Jesus. God has chosen and delivered us so that we might experience a new sight, a new taste. God’s shining of his light into the soul does not merely awaken us to the existence or reality of spiritual things, of God and Christ and the Holy Spirit. It also shows the excellency, glory, and beauty of such and imparts a new taste for what is “marvelous” about God.

2:10 Verse 10 is Peter’s adaptation and application to the NT church of the story of Hosea and Gomer (in particular, Hos. 1:6, 9; 2:4, 23). The contrasts in this verse are striking and deliberate on Peter’s part. A literalistic translation might read,

who *then* not people,
but now people of God;
 the ones *not* having received mercy,
but now the ones having received mercy.

Hosea was to represent God. Gomer, his wife, was to play the part of Israel. God directed Hosea to name his children in ways that would teach the people of Israel important lessons. Thus his firstborn, a son, was named Jezreel, which means “God scatters,” pointing to the judgment that would befall Israel. The second child, a daughter, was named Lo-ruhama, which means “not pitied.” And the third child, another son, was called Lo-ammi, “not my people” (Hos. 1:4, 6, 9).

However, the Lord graciously transforms the threats implied in the names of Hosea's children into blessings. Such is the power of God's love that Jezreel will be planted in the land (the Hebrew word meaning "scattered" can also mean "sown"; Hos. 2:22). The Lord declares that he will have mercy on Lo-ruhamah and will say to Lo-ammi, "You are my people" (Hos. 2:23). Thus we see that the redemptive love of Hosea for Gomer, and of God for Israel, was a picture of God's love for all of his people across the ages, including Peter's original readers and the church today.

Response

Peter's portrayal of Jesus Christ in these verses echoes his sermon in Acts 4, where Peter boldly declares, "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). No one is exempt from a response to the revelation God has made of himself in Christ. All will be held accountable for their belief or unbelief. To put it as simply as possible: one's eternal destiny depends upon one's relationship to Jesus Christ. In a world that prizes pluralism and seeks to affirm the equal validity of all beliefs, regardless of their object and often based solely on their sincerity, this passage is a stark reminder that the dividing line between heaven and hell runs through the cross of Christ.

1 PETER 2:11–4:11

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

¹³ Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution,¹ whether it be to the emperor² as supreme, ¹⁴ or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵ For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants³ of God. ¹⁷ Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

¹⁸ Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he

suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

3 Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won without a word by the conduct of their wives, ²when they see your respectful and pure conduct. ³Do not let your adorning be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear— ⁴but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. ⁵For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, ⁶as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. And you are her children, if you do good and do not fear anything that is frightening.

⁷Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you ⁴of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

⁸Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. ⁹Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ¹⁰For

“Whoever desires to love life

and see good days,

let him keep his tongue from evil

and his lips from speaking deceit;

¹¹ let him turn away from evil and do good;

let him seek peace and pursue it.

¹² For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,

and his ears are open to their prayer.

But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

¹³Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?

¹⁴But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered ⁵once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which ⁶he went and proclaimed ⁷to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because ⁸they formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. ²¹Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²²who has gone into heaven

and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

4 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh,¹ arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,² so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.³ For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do, living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry.⁴ With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you;⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.⁶ For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.

⁷The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers.⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace:¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹Or every institution ordained for people ²Or king; also verse 17 ³For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface ⁴Some manuscripts *since you are joint heirs* ⁵Some manuscripts *died* ⁶Or *the Spirit, in whom* ⁷Or *preached* ⁸Or *when* ⁹Some manuscripts add *for us*; some *for you*

Section Overview

We see in this extended passage (2:11–4:11), which is the equivalent to one paragraph in the original Greek, that Peter's vision for the Christian life is wide-ranging and pervasive. Those who have been ransomed by the blood of Christ and graciously shaped to be a temple for God's presence are to live unique and countercultural lives so that the world cannot help but take notice. Many will respond with disdain and persecution, while others will themselves be changed by the same saving grace. If we suffer, says Peter, let us be certain that it is for righteousness' sake. There is no virtue in enduring pain for sins committed, but when we suffer because of our faith, we must respond as Christ did, without reviling or revenge.

There is no area of life in which the Christian ethic does not apply. Peter calls for personal purity and for submission to those in authority, even when they do not share the same convictions. He urges the believing wife to follow humbly her husband's lead, even if he does not know Christ. Believing husbands must honor and encourage their wives as fellow heirs of the grace of eternal life.

As seen elsewhere in this letter, Peter writes with a keen sense of eschatological urgency. Knowing that the end of all things is at hand, he calls for self-control, sober-minded prayer, and sacrificial service for the sake of others. No matter how intense the opposition we face, whether from an unbelieving society or from

demonic spirits, Peter encourages us with the reminder that Christ has suffered for our sins, has risen from the dead, and has ascended to the right hand of the Father. His victory is ours.

Section Outline

- III. The Spiritual and Moral Life of the People of God (2:11–4:11)
 - A. Abstaining from the Passions of the Flesh (2:11–12)
 - 1. Negatively Stated (2:11)
 - 2. Positively Stated (2:12)
 - B. Submission to Authority as a Way of Life (2:13–3:12)
 - 1. Submission of All to the Governing Authorities (2:13–17)
 - 2. Submission of Servants to Their Masters (2:18–25)
 - a. The Admonition (2:18–20)
 - b. The Example (2:21–25)
 - 3. Submission of Wives to Their Husbands (3:1–6)
 - a. The Admonition (3:1–4)
 - b. The Example (3:5–6)
 - 4. The Honoring of Wives by Their Husbands (3:7)
 - 5. Mutual Respect and Love for All (3:8–12)
 - C. Being Zealous for Good in All Things and the Promised Vindication (3:13–4:6)
 - 1. Suffering for Doing Good (3:13–17)
 - 2. The Victory and Vindication of Christ (3:18–22)
 - 3. The Victory and Vindication of Christians (4:1–6)
 - a. The Example of Christ (4:1–2)
 - b. Your Former Lifestyle (4:3)
 - c. The Future Judgment (4:4–6)
 - D. Love, Hospitality, and Service (4:7–11)
 - 1. Pray for One Another (4:7)
 - 2. Love One Another (4:8)
 - 3. Be Hospitable to One Another (4:9)
 - 4. Serve One Another (4:10–11)

Comment

2:11 The terms “sojourners” (*paroikous*) and “exiles” (*parepidēmous*) have already appeared in this letter, the former in 1:17 and the latter in 1:1. Achtemeier helpfully points out that “God took people who *were* at home and turned them into aliens and exiles. . . . It is [this] change in status . . . and [its] issuing problems that prompted the writing of this letter.”³¹

There is something of a causal force in Peter’s description of his readers using these terms. It is *because* they are sojourners and exiles that they must obey the

³¹ Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 75n35; emphasis his.

exhortation to abstain from passions that characterize people at home in this world. Believers should have the strength to say no to fleshly passions, because such passions belong to this world but believers do not.

Peter is not calling for cultural isolation. In fact, as verse 12 will make clear, it is precisely as we live in this world and encounter nonbelievers that our lives will, by God's grace, have a transforming effect, all to his glory.

The "passions of the flesh" are not merely sexual sins but are any and all desires characteristic of fallen humanity, whether greed, lust, gossip, pride, or perhaps in particular the sins cited in 2:1 (malice, deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander). Such a command implies that inward desires are not beyond our control or simply "who we are" or something to which we must acquiesce and yield; rather, they are to be consciously controlled through the power of the indwelling Spirit. We are exhorted not merely to abstain from the outward expression of sinful desire but to kill the desire itself.

The seriousness of the challenge we face is highlighted by the verb translated "wage war" (*strateuomai*). This image is one of armed conflict in which the deceitful desires (Eph. 4:22) of our flesh seek to overwhelm and undermine the devotion of our "souls" to a life of holiness (cf. 1 Pet. 1:14–15).

2:12 Peter again takes up the language of "conduct" or lifestyle employed earlier in 1:15 and 17 (*anastrophē*). It is striking that the conduct or behavior of his predominantly Gentile readership is here described as being "among the Gentiles" (*en tois ethnesin*). Peter clearly views them no longer as the pagan unbelievers they once were but as members of the true people of God (2:4–10).

When Peter exhorts his readers to keep their conduct "honorable," he does not use the typical Greek word for "good" (here it is *kalos*, not *agathos*). *Kalos* goes beyond the idea of moral goodness or ethical righteousness and includes the element of aesthetic worth and beauty: a goodness that commends itself to the beholder by its nobility and attractiveness.

The purpose of such an honorable and attractive life is that when (or perhaps *because*; the participle translated "they speak against" could be either temporal or causal) non-Christians observe the behavior of believers, such nonbelievers might glorify God on the day of "visitation." The latter term (*episkopē*) can refer either to a positive display of God's power (LXX Gen. 50:24; Ex. 3:16; Luke 19:44) or, in a negative sense, to impending judgment (cf. LXX Isa. 10:3; Jer. 10:15). Here it is most likely synonymous with the return of Christ: in 1 Peter 1:5 it is at the "last time" that our salvation will be consummated; in 1:7 "the revelation of Jesus Christ" will be upon his return; 1:13 refers again to "the revelation of Jesus Christ"; and in 4:13 Jesus' return is the moment "when his glory is revealed."

Although slander and persecution often only intensify, the Spirit is able to make use of our "honorable" and appealing conduct in order to pierce the hardened heart and bring light to the darkened soul. In some cases those who are Gentiles or were unbelievers will come to see the beauty and splendor and

sufficiency of the God we profess and will embrace Christ and thereby “glorify God” (cf. Matt. 5:14–16).

Response

Although many today would identify their greatest enemy as fanatical religious terrorism or an uncertain economy or the moral decay in society, Peter would have us know that the greatest threat to both the temporal and the eternal well-being of our souls is “the passions of the flesh.” These are a far greater threat than financial ruin or physical affliction. We must labor today to sound the alarm regarding the ever-present power of personal, sinful passions that seek to lead us away from the source and comfort of life, our Lord Jesus Christ. Are we aware of the threat that sinful passions pose? Are we cognizant of our identity as sojourners and strangers on this earth? Are we actively availing ourselves of the spiritual resources that God has provided to help us wage and win this war against the silent and ever-so-subtle promptings of fleshly passion?

Comment

Many scholars believe 1 Peter 2:13–3:7 constitutes what is known as a household or domestic code. Other passages in the NT where such codes may appear include Ephesians 5:21–6:9; Colossians 3:18–4:1; and Titus 3:1–2. In the ancient Greco-Roman world, these codes set forth conduct expected of those within a household as well as responsibilities to civil authorities. The NT “codes” (if they should warrant that designation) are uniquely adapted to highlight godly behaviors within the church of Christ.

2:13–14 The aorist passive imperative *hypotagēte* (from *hypotassō*, “to subject”) governs the entire paragraph through verse 17; elsewhere in the NT this verb is often translated “submit.” The extent of one’s submission is to be wide-ranging: to “every human institution” (v. 13), or, more literally, to every “human creation” or “creature.” Peter has in mind particularly the human leaders in authority over us. Peter describes “emperors” or “kings,” as well as “governors,” as “human creatures” in order to counter the claim of the emperor cult, which typically deified the Roman ruler. They are but “creatures,” says Peter, not the Creator. There is no need to deify or worship them, but we must obey them nonetheless.

Peter was not naive about the potential for corruption or evil in those who held political power. He knew all too well about the depravity of those who wielded authority in Rome and Palestine. And yet here he tells his readers, without hesitation, to “be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution” (v. 13), whether emperors or kings, and to “honor” them (v. 17).

Of crucial importance is the prepositional phrase “for the Lord’s sake,” or “on account of the Lord” (*dia ton kyrion*), which provides the rationale or underlying motivation for such obedience. We submit not only because God is the one who sets in place all civil authority (cf. Dan. 2:20, 37–38) but also so that the “ignorance

of foolish people” will be silenced (1 Pet. 2:15). Our obedience to the governing authorities, therefore, is at best only secondary; our primary allegiance is to God. It is to bring honor to him, and to make known his greatness and majesty, that we give our lives in obedience to the emperor or king or president or whoever is in power.

The “him” through or by which governors are sent could be either the emperor or God himself. Their dual function, in keeping with what Paul writes in Romans 13:3–4, is to mete out punishment or justice on those who perpetrate evil (lit., “evildoers,” *kakopoiōn*) and to “praise” (or express appreciation and commendation to) those who do good (lit., “good-doers,” *agathopoiōn*; this word appears again in 1 Pet. 2:20; 3:6, 17; 4:19).

This passage perhaps implies that the persecution being endured was not state-sponsored but stemmed from the pagan populace as a whole, who took offense at the unusual behavior of Christians. But even if such persecution were state-sponsored, the obligation to submit to governing authorities would remain valid—unless it would require one to violate a God-given command (cf. Acts 4:17–21; 5:27–32).

2:15 The opening “For this” (*hoti houtōs*) may be retrospective, giving us the reason for the submission previously enjoined. Others take it as prospective, directing our attention to the impending exhortation of verse 15. The latter is more likely.

The participle rendered “by doing good” is instrumental, indicating the means by which the ignorance of foolish people is exposed and silenced (lit., “muzzled”). Their “ignorance” (*agnōsian*) is not for want of formal education but is due to their foolish rebellion against God. Paul similarly describes unbelievers as ignorant (*agnoian*) “due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18).

The point of Peter here in verse 15 is virtually identical to his point in verse 12: we must live in such a way that our confidence in Christ and our own humility is evident to all. We must let our joyful, generous, sacrificial, Christ-centered lifestyle silence the accusations of foolish people.

2:16 The imperative “Live” is supplied by the ESV (as is “living” later in the verse). Some interpreters believe the clause is dependent on the imperative “be subject” from verse 13 (hence, “be subject . . . as free people”), but the ESV is most likely correct in taking this as an independent statement with the implied imperative “live.” Peter’s call is for Christians not to use their blood-bought freedom as a pretext or excuse (“cover-up”) for disobeying the governing authorities. He once again grounds his exhortation in our identity as God’s people, literally his “bondservants.” We submit to the authorities not because we are *their* servants but because we are *God’s*.

2:17 All four imperatives in this verse are second person plural in the original Greek; the first is in the aorist tense while the final three are in the present tense. Some suggest the aorist tense is used in order to echo the aorist imperative in

verse 13, “be subject.” While this is supported by the broad extent of obligation in both texts, the distance between the two makes this unlikely. In any case, classifying this aorist usage is difficult. Some believe it to be ingressive: “start/begin honoring everyone.” Others read it as a gnomic or timeless aorist, describing a universally expected mode of behavior.³² All things considered, the latter is more likely. Thus it is not simply the governing authorities who are to be honored, but all who are created in God’s image.

The second imperative calls for love of the “brotherhood,” the community of believers (cf. 1:22). We are also to “fear God” and to “honor the emperor” (this final exhortation forms an *inclusio*³³ with 2:13).

Response

People often respond to the call for submission to authority with resentment or defiance. But when the authority in view is duly constituted by God, submission is a beautiful expression of confidence in God’s sovereign disposal of all of life’s affairs. One need not agree with rulers’ political convictions or social policy in order to honor them in a way that honors God. Living today in a contentious political atmosphere gives us the perfect opportunity to put on display our ultimate allegiance to God.

Comment

2:18 The theme of willing submission that began in verse 13 with the imperative *hypotagēte* is continued in verse 18 with the participial form of the same verb, *hypotassomenoi* (undoubtedly imperatival in force: “be subject”). The submission in view here is of “servants” (*oiketai* has in view household servants) to their “masters.”

The manner or spirit in which such submission is to be embraced is “with all respect.” In view of the exhortation in verse 17 (“fear God”), the object of their “respect” (the noun form of the verb “fear” in v. 17) is not so much their masters but God himself. Throughout this larger section we see Peter grounding each of his exhortations in the believer’s devotion or commitment to God (v. 13, “for the Lord’s sake”; v. 15, “for this is the will of God”; v. 16, “living as servants of God”; v. 19, “mindful of God”; v. 20, “in the sight of God”).

A worldly perspective would call for such submission only to those masters who are “good and gentle,” but Peter extends it to include also the “unjust” (priming his readers for the example of Christ, who submitted humbly to unjust treatment at the hands of wicked executioners).

2:19–20 The reason (*gar*, “for”) Peter gives for this counterintuitive command is that it is a “gracious thing.” This unusual use of *charis* (“grace, favor”) likely has the sense of divine approval or blessing (indeed, a well-attested variant has *charis para tō theō*: “gracious before God,” undoubtedly influenced by *charis para theō* in v. 20).

³² Wallace, *First Peter*, 562.

³³ An “inclusio” is a pair of literary “bookends” that begin and end a text with similar material.

Thus Peter is stating that favor and blessing from God come to those who cherish and treasure him above earthly vindication or respect (this is confirmed both by the use of “credit” in verse 20 and by Peter’s assurance to those who suffer in 3:9; cf. also Matt. 6:4, 6, 18; Luke 6:32–35).³⁴

“Mindful of God” might be more literally rendered “on account of conscience toward God” (the genitive *theou* is likely objective in meaning). Nevertheless, “mindful” is an apt rendering of *syneidēsis*, which has the sense of awareness or conscientiousness in 2 Corinthians 5:11 and Hebrews 10:2. The behavior of Christian servants must at all times be motivated by an awareness that God is watching and will reward accordingly.

The participle translated “while suffering” is the first occurrence in this letter of a verb that appears regularly from this point on (in 1 Pet. 2:20, 21, 23; 3:14, 17, 18; 4:1(2x), 15, 19; 5:10). Faithful and submissive endurance under unjust suffering is clearly a primary theme for Peter, demonstrated both in the experience of Jesus (2:23; 3:18; 4:1) and in the lives of his followers.

The “for” with which 2:20 begins indicates that the verse provides an elaboration on what was just stated in verse 19. God often wills believers to suffer for doing good precisely so that, through their humble and faithful endurance, others will be compelled to stop and take notice, perhaps asking: “What is it about this God whom he loves that could inspire such loyalty and humility?” Bearing up under unjust suffering shines a bright and breathtaking light on the grace, glory, and value of God such that people who by nature seek their own justice are happy to wait and let God sort it out.

“Credit” (*kleos*) corresponds to “gracious thing” (*charis*) from verse 19. Such reward comes only when we “endure” (twice here) suffering in spite of our doing good. There is no “credit” for endurance when the suffering is deserved.

2:21 Peter grounds (“for,” *gar*) the previous instruction (vv. 18–20) in the reminder that suffering for righteousness’ sake is God’s calling on every Christian life. Far from unjust suffering being outside God’s plan or power, it is the very thing to which he has called us. The rationale or justification (“because,” *hoti*) for this calling is that Christ “also” (an adverbial use of *kai*) suffered unjustly, in our place (the substitutionary force of *hyper hymōn* is undeniable), and in doing so left us an example (*hypogrammos*) for how we should embrace suffering that we do not deserve.³⁵

Needless to say, we cannot imitate the suffering of Christ in every respect, as his death was propitiatory and atoning whereas ours cannot be. His “example” is found in the way he chose to endure suffering without seeking to exact revenge on his persecutors. There was no complaint, bitterness, or self-justification from him when he was betrayed, tried, and condemned. Instead, he continued to trust God to sustain him and to vindicate him at the proper time.

³⁴ That being said, one cannot dismiss the possibility that Peter attributes the ability to endure under unjust and painful circumstances to God’s gracious enablement.

³⁵ Forbes points out that *hypogrammos* (“example”) was used in ancient literature of a “stencil that was followed in tracing,” and the term “had a quite common figurative usage of a model for behavior” (1 Peter, 90).

2:22–25 These verses contain four relative clauses (the first three beginning with *hos*, “who,” the fourth with *hou*), two of which describe the response of Jesus in suffering, with a focus on his character, and two of which describe the nature and purpose of his atoning sacrifice.

The first relative clause (v. 22) introduces a quote from Isaiah 53:9 that highlights Jesus’ lack of sin in how he responded to his executioners (on this see Luke 4:34; John 6:69; 8:46; 9:16; Acts 3:14; 4:27–30; Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19; 3:18; 1 John 3:5). That Christ recoiled from “deceit” (*dolos*; also in 1 Pet. 2:1) is a reinforcement of Peter’s earlier exhortation concerning how we are similarly to conduct ourselves (2:1).

The second relative clause (v. 23) introduces two additional features of our Lord’s response to his enemies. The translation of the two participles as temporal (“*when* he was reviled” and “*when* he suffered”) may just as easily be concessive: “*although* he was reviled/*although* he suffered.” Instead of responding in kind, Jesus chose to entrust himself to God’s care and vindication.

There is an ellipsis here, as no direct object of “entrusting” (such as “himself”) is in the original text. But “himself” seems appropriate, especially in light of what we later read in 4:19: “Let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.”

The third relative clause (lit., “who . . . himself”; 2:24) turns from a focus on the moral character of Christ to the nature and purpose of his dying. The statement that he “bore our sins in his body on the tree” simply means that Christ bore the wrath of God aroused by our sins, doing so by being nailed to a tree, a cross, where he satisfied the demands of divine justice and endured the eternal penalty our sin merited (similarly Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 5:9–10). But it is not merely the removal of our guilt or the righteous wrath of God that is in view in Christ’s death. Its purpose was also to make possible our death to sin and a life of practical righteousness (1 Pet. 2:24b).

In the fourth and final relative clause Peter declares, “by his wounds you have been healed” (v. 24c, citing Isa. 53:5). By enduring the wrath of God against willful human wickedness, Christ defeated the power of pain and infirmity, and thus Peter can aver that Christ’s death “healed” us. In other words, Jesus paid the price of sin so that one day, when he returns to glorify his people, he may wholly do away with all sickness.

Often in Scripture the sinful condition of the soul is analogous to a body suffering from various wounds (e.g., Isa. 1:5–6). Forgiveness and restoration are therefore described in terms of a bodily healing. Here the apostle portrays us in our sin as if we were a wounded body in need of physical healing—and by his atoning death the Great Physician has truly “healed” our hearts.

2:25 As sinners we are continually straying like sheep, but by the redemptive grace of Jesus we have been enabled to return to the shepherd and guardian of our souls. The word “for” (*gar*) or “because” with which verse 25 opens indicates that the “healing” in view in verse 24 is from the punishment we deserved for our

spiritual “straying” in verse 25. In other words, it is primarily spiritual healing from the disease of sin, not physical restoration of the body, that Peter has in mind. Our sickness or affliction was that of having strayed from God. The healing provided by Christ, therefore, is to bring us back to God and restore our relationship with him.

Response

Nothing comes more naturally to the human heart than self-defense and retaliation against those who have mistreated us. To embrace unjust opposition requires a supernatural energy and a spiritual example to follow. We find both in the crucified and risen Christ. The only way we will find the strength to endure the wickedness of others is the constant reminder that, in his having done the same, Jesus secured for us forgiveness of sins and the healing of our souls.

Comment

3:1–2 That Peter is addressing wives, rather than women in general, is evident from his use of “your own” (*idiois*) in addressing the *gynaiikes* (“wives”; some manuscripts omit the definite article *hai*, perhaps to focus on “wives” as a vocative). Here they are commanded (the participle is clearly imperatival in force) to be “subject” or “submissive” to their husbands. The use of *hypotassomenai* (participial form of *hypotassō*), together with the opening word “likewise” (*homoioḗs*), indicates that the imperative in 2:13, “be subject” (*hypotagēte*), continues to govern Peter’s thought. Peter is not teaching that wives’ submission to their husbands will be identical in every way to that of servants to their masters (2:18ff.). But in distinctive ways, each is called to be submissive to God-ordained authority.

The purpose of wives’ willing submission is evangelistic: a believing wife married to an unbelieving husband (cf. 1 Cor. 7:12–16), that is to say, a husband who is actively hostile to “the word” (*logō*, an obvious reference to the gospel), might by means of her conduct perhaps bring him to saving faith. For “conduct” with reference to a life of holiness, see 1 Peter 1:15, where the same word is found (*anastrophē*). “Without a word” (*aneu logou*) points to the wives’ verbal silence. Peter does not mean that these women should never speak at all, but that their godly and loving behavior will likely be more effective in persuading their husbands of the truth of the gospel than any prolonged verbal argumentation (the verb rendered “may be won” was originally a commercial term referring to “gain” or “profit” but came to be used in the church for conversion; cf. Matt. 18:15; 1 Cor. 9:19–22). As an unbelieving husband observes the seemingly inexplicable joy and peace of his wife, the Spirit will use this to awaken him to the gospel.

Submission carries the implication of voluntarily yielding to a recognized authority. As already noted in 2:13–25, such subjection in no way implies (much less requires) the notion of an inferior yielding to a moral or spiritual superior. An ontological equality exists within all human hierarchical relationships. Nor does submission mean that a wife must always agree with her husband, as here she differs with him on the most important issue of all: the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Verse 2 amplifies the behavior required in verse 1. “When” an unbelieving husband observes the “respectful and pure conduct” of his wife, there is hope that such will be used by God to bring about the husband’s faith in Christ. The participle translated “when they see” could just as easily be causal (“because they see”) or even instrumental (“by seeing”). “Respectful” is the rendering of *en phobō* (lit., “in fear”), and in view of how the term is used elsewhere in this letter (1:17; 2:17–18), here it may point more to the wife’s reverence for God than to her respectful attitude toward her husband (although the latter is always appropriate).

3:3–4 The instruction in these two verses may have been prompted by the tendency of some women to think that their outward beauty and fashionable clothing would make life easier at home or perhaps even help in winning their unbelieving husbands to Christ. There is nothing intrinsically evil about such things, but Peter’s counsel is for women not to put their trust in them. He argues against what is overdone, excessively expensive and ostentatious, or inconsistent with Christian modesty.

Peter mentions three things in particular that constitute what is “external” or “outward”: braiding hair, wearing gold jewelry, and wearing extravagant clothing. The alternative to trusting in what is external (*exōthen*; v. 3) or visible is to rely on what is “hidden” (*kryptos*; v. 4) or invisible—certain virtues that exist wholly within the heart but are given outward expression in how one lives. Adorn the soul, says Peter, with what is “imperishable” (“beauty” is not in the original text but aptly conveys the focus on inward attractiveness over against mere physical beauty). Here Peter identifies what is inward and imperishable as a “gentle and quiet spirit” (*pneumatōs* here is not the Holy Spirit but the human spirit or disposition, which is of course sustained and made possible by the ministry of the Spirit of God).

The antecedent of “which” (the relative pronoun *hō*) is the “spirit” or inner disposition of meekness and quietness, which in turn is explanatory of what the “hidden person of the heart” entails. The reason for Peter’s focus on this invisible trait is that it is “very precious,” of great value, in the sight of God.

3:5–6 In order to reinforce his point (*gar*, “for”), Peter appeals to godly women in the OT, particularly Sarah (the others in his mind would likely include Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah). Each exhibited precisely what Peter called for in verse 4: a preference for internal over external adornment and for godly submission to their husbands. Their “hope” in God is another way of saying that they lived *en phobō* (“in fear,” translated “respectful” in v. 2).

The precise way in which these OT women “used to adorn [*kosmeō*; the related noun form, *kosmos*, “adornment,” appeared in v. 3] themselves” was “by submitting” (participle of means or manner) to their own husbands. For the fourth time in this paragraph (2:11–4:11) a form of *hypotassō* appears (this is the third instance of it as a participle), reinforcing the earlier observation that Peter is concerned, throughout 2:13–3:7, with godly submission to divinely appointed authority.

It was precisely in “calling him lord” that Sarah “obeyed” Abraham, her husband. Peter here alludes to Genesis 18:12, where Sarah expressed disbelief in God’s promise that she would bear a child. After all, she was barren and Abraham (“my lord”) was old. This comment was a mere aside; she was talking to herself, and there is no indication that she intended Abraham or anyone else to hear her. She is thus praised because she honored him when no one was listening. (“Lord” is a term of respect, something akin to “Sir,” and was certainly not an affirmation of Abraham’s divinity!)

“Children” may be an ethical designation, pointing to someone who imitates a quality in another. Hence women are Sarah’s “children” in the sense that they behave in relation to their husbands in the same way or manner that Sarah did. But more is likely intended than that. To be the “children” of Abraham (and thus Sarah) suggests covenantal status and spiritual membership in the people of God (cf. Luke 13:16; also Matt. 3:8–9). Paul likewise speaks elsewhere of those who have become the children of promise as having Sarah as their mother (Gal. 4:21–31).

Most interpreters take the two participles in verse 6b as conditional; hence, “if you do good and do not fear.” Others object, arguing that this would make their covenantal status dependent on their works. But it may well be that these two participles are not stating conditions on which covenant status hangs but rather are indicating two ways in which the authenticity of that status is confirmed (cf. Heb. 3:6, 14). To do good and not fear bears ongoing witness (both participles are present tense) to the reality of being Sarah’s children.

Since “anything . . . frightening” or intimidating could include any individual or experience posing a threat to one’s well-being (cf. Prov. 3:25), it is likely that the danger posed by unbelieving husbands is what Peter has particularly in mind.

3:7 Peter would never have us think that husbands do not also bear significant responsibility in the marriage relationship. In fact, they “likewise” must relate to their wives in a way consistent with who these women are in Christ. Once again the participial form of a verb is to be understood as imperatival: husbands are to “live” or dwell with their wives in an understanding way.

The phrase translated “in an understanding way” is, more literally, “according to knowledge.” It is unlikely that Peter means knowledge of God or of the nature of women in terms of their disposition and proclivities, over against the nature of men. The conjunction “as” (*hōs*) is likely providing us with the content of the knowledge in view: husbands are to live with their wives with the recognition or understanding that they are the “weaker vessel.” This refers not to moral or intellectual capacity but most likely to lesser physical strength and perhaps to social status. The comparative adjective (*asthenesterō*, “weaker”) requires that we recognize men to be “vessels” as well. But women, especially in the ancient world, were more vulnerable and more easily taken advantage of than men. This knowledge, then, is to govern how a husband relates to, protects, and honors his wife.

Wives are deserving of honor because they, no less so than believing men, are “heirs . . . of the grace of life.” Whether Peter intends us to understand this grace

as leading to life or as life itself (likely eternal life), his point is that women are equally included in the saving benefits of Christ's work.

Peter clearly conditions the answering of a man's prayers on his faithful obedience to this command. We should never presume that God will answer our prayers while we continue to mistreat those who are fellow heirs with us of eternal salvation. In view of Peter's subsequent citation in 3:12 of Psalm 34:15–16, we must assume that callous disregard of one's wife will close God's ears to our prayers and turn his face against us.

Response

Although there is much practical counsel for wives in this paragraph, I here draw attention to the responsibility of husbands. Wayne Grudem comes directly to the point, reminding us, "No Christian husband should presume to think that any spiritual good will be accomplished by his life without an effective ministry of prayer. And no husband may expect an effective prayer life unless he lives with his wife 'in an understanding way, bestowing honour' on her."³⁶

Comment

3:8–9 In saying, "Finally, all of you," Peter is not bringing the letter to a close but is concluding the "household code" that began in 2:13. *Pantes* ("all") indicates that he no longer has any particular group in mind but is now (3:8ff.) addressing the entire Christian community. There is obviously an ellipsis here, as no verb governs these virtues. We should probably assume some form of either *eimi* ("be") or *ginomai* ("become") or perhaps yet another imperatival participle.

First, Peter calls for "unity of mind," or a common purpose among believers. Although this word appears only here in the NT, we find the same emphasis elsewhere, especially in Paul's letters (cf. Rom. 15:5–7; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:1–2; 4:2). Peter is calling not for uniformity but rather for sharing the same spiritual values, recognizing and contending for the same theological truths, proclaiming the same gospel, and, most important of all, being devoted to and passionate about the same Christ and his supremacy and glory.

The noun translated "sympathy" is also unique to this verse in the NT and has the sense of having the same emotions or feelings as others so that one can respond with sensitivity to the need. The third virtue is the well-known term for "brotherly love" (*philadelphoi*). Christians must also cultivate a "tender heart" for one another: Peter's fourth term (*eusplanchnoi*) is related to the standard term for intestines, which were regarded as the seat of one's emotions. Believers are to be "tender-hearted" or "compassionate," to "feel generous in the depths of their being"; it is the antithesis of hypocrisy, acting tenderly while harboring malice. Finally, Christians are to have a "humble mind" (*tapeinophrones*), a word that in ancient times was regarded as a vice but is in fact a virtue in the redeemed community. Although appearing only

³⁶ Grudem, *First Epistle of Peter*, 146.

here in the NT, the term is closely related to *tapeinophrosynē* (“lowliness” or “humility of mind”) found in Acts 20:19; Ephesians 4:2; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 2:18, 23; 3:12; and 1 Peter 5:5.

The negative counterpart to these fruits of the Spirit is found in verse 9. The call for non-retaliation reminds us of how Jesus responded to those who reviled him (cf. 1 Pet. 2:23), suggesting that Peter has in mind our response not to those within the Christian community but to our persecutors from without (cf. Matt. 5:43–44; Luke 6:27–28; Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 5:15). Our response should be to “bless” or to invoke God’s grace upon our enemies, for this is precisely what he has done for us in Christ. Indeed, to “bless” others is the very purpose (*eis touto*, “unto this,” is used similarly in 1 Pet. 2:21 and 4:6) of our calling.

The conjunction *hina*, translated “that” (ESV), perhaps is introducing the purpose of our blessing others: “in order that you may obtain a blessing.” Alternatively, it may be expressing result: the obtaining or inheritance of a blessing comes as a result of having blessed others. The language of inheritance has been seen also in 1:4 and 3:7.

3:10–12 These three verses contain an extended citation of Psalm 34:12–16 as it reads in the LXX (numbered there as Ps. 33:13–17). The capacity to “love life and see [i.e., enjoy or experience] good days” is dependent on one’s commitment not to speak evilly or deceitfully. God simply will not bless those who seek verbal vengeance. But concrete action is also required, as the psalmist calls on us, negatively, to “turn away from evil” (*apo kakou*; genitive of separation) and, positively, to “do good.” To “seek” peace is the same as to “pursue” it.

God’s “eyes” are attentive to the needs of the righteous (i.e., those who resist the temptation to resort to verbal revenge) and his “ears” listen to their prayers. Those who “do evil” by using their tongues and lips to exact vengeance on those who have mistreated them will find that the Lord has turned his face “against” them. The preposition *epi*, used in verse 12a in the positive sense of “on” or “upon” is here in verse 12b used negatively, hence “against.” Peter once more, as in 3:7, ties answered prayer to godly obedience and humble trust in the sufficiency of God’s goodness.

Response

There is no more fearful thought than that the God of heaven and earth is “against” someone. You do not want God for an enemy! This is a powerful incentive to avoid the doing of “evil” (v. 12); an even more stimulating reason to “do good” (v. 11) is the enjoyment of God’s manifest presence and the grace he supplies to those who humbly submit to his instruction and guidance (cf. James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5).

Comment

3:13–14 Peter is still concerned with the necessity of godly behavior in the face of hostile opposition. This is evident from the rhetorical question with which verse 13 opens. The anticipated answer is, “No one.” All things being equal, being

“zealous for what is good” ought to assure a person of escape from harm. Some take this “harm” to be ultimate or eschatological, the point being that our earthly persecutors can do nothing to undermine or destroy our eternal inheritance in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:31, 35–39). But in view of the parallelism with 1 Peter 3:14, the “harm” is more likely equivalent to the physical “suffering” we endure now in this life. Peter is clearly a realist and knows that the Christian lifestyle will often provoke opposition, something he openly confessed in 2:20–21. In saying “even if” one should suffer for righteousness, he is not questioning whether it will occur. It most certainly will. What is of utmost concern for the believer is that the suffering be provoked by righteous living and not by one’s own sin.

There can be little doubt that Peter is alluding to the beatitude of Jesus in Matthew 5:10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In both instances the believer is declared “blessed” (*makarioi*), a pronouncement Peter will repeat in 4:14.

The latter half of 3:14 literally reads, “Do not fear the fear of them.” He is not instructing believers not to fear what frightens unbelievers. The genitive (“of them”) is objective. We are not to be afraid of unbelievers or intimidated by what they might do.

3:15–16 In place of fear the believer is to “honor Christ the Lord as holy.” The translation “honor . . . as holy” reflects one word in the original text, the same verb (*hagiazō*) used in the opening petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “hallowed” or “sanctified” be your name. The meaning is much the same whether Peter intends us to “honor Christ as the Lord” (in which case *ton christon* is the direct object of the verb *hagiasate* and *kyrion* is the complement) or to “honor the Lord, that is, Christ” (where *kyrion* is the direct object and *ton christon* is in apposition to it). The ESV takes a slightly different tack and makes “Lord” appositional to “Christ” (hence “Christ the Lord”).

To honor Christ as Lord means to believe truly and sincerely that Christ alone is Lord and that our enemies are not, no matter how much power and authority they may wield. He alone must be cherished in our “hearts” as utterly unique and precious above all. We must let the reality of his supremacy be preeminent in our thinking and feeling and govern our response to those who seek our harm. In this way our refusal to fear our enemies honors Christ as Lord as it shows our hope in him to be unshakable.

We must also “always” be “prepared” to defend the hope that is within us. Perhaps this defense is itself the way or means by which we honor the Lord as holy. In any case, Peter is thinking not of the scholarly apologist or of a formal courtroom setting (although cf. Acts 25:16; 2 Tim. 4:16) but of a daily (“always . . . anyone”) readiness to explain the “reason” or “ground” (*logon*) for why our hope is in Christ alone.

The manner of our defense matters greatly: it must be with “gentleness” and “respect.” By “gentleness” Peter refers to an absence of arrogance and pride and

the presence of humility and calmness. Given Peter's consistent use of *phobos* in this letter (1:17; 2:17; 3:2), the word "respect" should perhaps be rendered "fear" (*phobou*), referring less to one's attitude toward other people and more to one's reverence for God.

It may well be that "having a good conscience" (cf. 2:19) is the result of conducting oneself with "gentleness and respect." Others treat this as an imperative: in addition to responding with gentleness and respect, one must "have a good conscience" so that when enemies slander and revile (cf. 2:23; 3:9), it is they who are put to shame. Earlier, in 2:12, the apparent purpose of such behavior was the conversion of one's enemies, while in 2:15 Peter envisioned their being silenced. Whether or not the "shame" they here experience is a prelude to genuine conversion is difficult to know.

3:17 This verse is a virtual echo of 2:20 and anticipates what will follow in 4:15–16. John Elliott argues that the point here is "not that God wills suffering but that *God wills doing what is right* rather than doing what is wrong . . . even if and when this results in suffering."³⁷ However, this seems to be an effort to evade an obvious and, for Elliott, uncomfortable theological conclusion—that God often wills his children to suffer in spite of their obedience to him. Peter's point is that, if suffering should be God's desire (lit., "if the will of God should will"), we must be sure that such suffering not be for sins we have committed.

Response

Whereas not all Christians possess the spiritual gift of evangelism (Eph. 4:11), no believer is exempt from making Christ known to those who ask for an account of the hope in our hearts. We should know and be quick to explain why he is more precious to us than all else and why we are prepared to suffer for his sake, even when it is unjust and undeserved. Nothing will more readily commend Christ to the unbeliever than the believer's patient endurance of persecution for the sake of Jesus' name.

Comment

1 Peter 3:18–22 is not merely the most difficult passage in 1 Peter; it is one of the more challenging texts in the entire NT.³⁸ Our approach to it thus calls for both careful analysis and hermeneutical humility.³⁹

3:18–19⁴⁰ That Jesus died "once for all" (*hapax*) puts his sacrifice in contrast with the OT sacrifices, which had to be repeated daily. That he died "the righteous for the

³⁷ Elliott, *1 Peter*, 635; emphasis his.

³⁸ Martin Luther's conclusion is shared by many: "[Verses 18–19] is as strange a text and as dark a saying as any in the New Testament, so that I am not yet sure what St. Peter intended" (cited by Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 252).

³⁹ For additional insights on this passage, see Daniel R. Hyde, *In Defense of the Descent: A Response to Contemporary Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2010).

⁴⁰ There are numerous textual problems in verse 18. Some manuscripts read "he died" (*apethanen*) rather than "he suffered." Some add "on your behalf" or "for you" (*hyper hymōn*) while others read "on our behalf" (*hyper hēmōn*). Notwithstanding these variations, the likely reading is reflected in the ESV: "Christ also suffered once for sins."

unrighteous” (cf. Isa. 53:11) points us to the requirement that an atoning sacrifice be unblemished and spotless and also highlights the unmistakable substitutionary nature of Christ’s death. The aim of Christ was to overcome the alienation brought about by our sin and to bring us to God, a theme found yet again in Romans 5:2 and Ephesians 2:18.

We must not overlook the seemingly unimportant “also” (*kai*), which indicates that Peter is here providing the rationale for verses 13–17. In other words, we should readily embrace undeserved suffering because “Christ *also*” suffered in this way. Needless to say, we do not suffer in the precise way he did, as a substitutionary sacrifice to propitiate the wrath of God, but we should still find in Christ’s atonement an incentive to bear up under the oppressive persecution of the non-Christian world.

The last clause of verse 18 provides an apt transition to a focus on Christ’s triumphant defeat of all enemies, as seen in his resurrection, ascension, and exaltation to the right hand of God. His “being” put to death and made alive suggests either a causal relationship, in the sense that he brought us to God *because* he died and was raised, or an instrumental emphasis: it was *by means of* his death and resurrection that we are brought near to God. The difference between these two options is minimal. There may even be a concessive force to the first participle: “Although he was put to death in the flesh, he was also made alive in the spirit.”

The terms “flesh” and “spirit” do not refer to the two elements of which we are composed—the material (body) and the immaterial (soul or spirit)—as if to suggest that the former dies but the latter survives. Such Greek categories of thought are foreign to the NT. Neither do these terms refer to the two natures of Christ, human and divine. Rather they refer to two modes or spheres of existence. As R. T. France has noted, “*sarx* [flesh] in the New Testament denotes the natural human sphere of existence, and *pneuma* [spirit] in contrast with it denotes the supernatural sphere.”⁴¹ Again France explains:

Here the contrast is between Christ’s death in the natural sphere, and his risen life in the eternal, spiritual sphere. His earthly life ended, but that was succeeded by his heavenly life. Thus the second phrase [“made alive in the spirit”] does not refer to Christ disembodied, but to Christ risen to life on a new plane.⁴²

In other words, “made alive in the spirit” does not refer to an experience of Christ prior to the resurrection, as if after he died he entered into an intermediate, disembodied state.⁴³ Simply put, the final clause of verse 18 is directly descriptive

41 R. T. France, “Exegesis in Practice: Two Examples,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 267. Paul speaks similarly, although with slightly different terms (*psychikos* and *pneumatikos*), in 1 Corinthians 15:42ff., where his focus is on two different types of bodies adapted or suitable to two different modes of existence.

42 Ibid., 267. Likewise, Jobes, *1 Peter*, 239.

43 For an extended defense of the notion that Christ “descended” into Hades after his death but before his resurrection, see the work by Justin W. Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ’s Descent into the Underworld* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

of the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. 1 Tim. 3:16). He died in the earthly, temporal realm, a realm characterized by flesh, and he was made alive or raised to the heavenly, eternal realm, a realm characterized by spirit.⁴⁴

The opening relative clause in verse 19, “in which,” clearly has as its antecedent the word *pneumati* (“spirit”) from verse 18. Since the latter has in view the resurrection of Christ, what follows in verse 19 must be an experience *subsequent* to his resurrection, not prior to it.⁴⁵ Whereas some argue that the clause “in which” has no antecedent and should simply be translated “when,” each case they cite in 1 Peter as purportedly similar fails to convince insofar as not one of them has a masculine or neuter noun in the preceding clause that might be taken as an antecedent (cf. 1:6; 2:12; 3:16; 4:4).

The verb translated “went” in verse 19a is crucial for the proper interpretation of this passage. There is nothing in the verb suggesting the idea of a “descent” into hell: it is the standard Greek verb meaning “to go” (*poreuomai*). Its significance is seen in its usage in verse 22, where it describes the ascension of the risen Christ: he “has gone” (or “went”) into heaven, where he is seated at God’s right hand. As we will see below, the verb here describes the same event: the ascension and exaltation of the risen Savior. In other words, far from describing a “descent,” it actually describes an “ascent.”⁴⁶

Who or what are the “spirits in prison” to whom Christ made proclamation? There are three primary competing views. One is that they are the “spirits” of human beings who have died physically. But, as France points out, in *none* of the purported parallel texts supporting such a view “is *pneuma* used absolutely; it is always qualified by ‘of the dead,’ ‘of the righteous’ [Heb. 12:23], etc. If *ta pneumata* here meant ‘people who have died,’ it would be a unique absolute use in this sense. This does not exclude the possibility entirely, but it casts strong doubt on it.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, the noun *pneuma* is frequently used in the NT for angelic beings.⁴⁸ One must also take into account the statement in verse 20 that these “spirits” in prison “did not obey.” If the “spirits” in question were living human beings when this rebellion occurred, we would expect Peter to refer to the “spirits of those who disobeyed.”

Those who insist on taking “spirits” as a reference to human beings identify them as those men and women who rebelled in the days of Noah, perhaps especially those who mocked him for building an ark. Thus it was the preincarnate

⁴⁴ The datives of “flesh” and “spirit” are datives of either sphere or reference/respect. Again, the distinction is minimal.

⁴⁵ In the words of Peter H. Davids, “It was, then, in his postresurrection state that Christ went somewhere and preached something to certain spirits in some prison. All these terms call for an explanation” (*The First Epistle of Peter* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990], 138).

⁴⁶ Had Peter wanted us to think of a “descent” he likely would have used the verb *katabainō* (“to go down, descend”). Achtemeier rightly concludes that “there is no necessity, therefore, to understand the verb *poreutheis* to mean ‘descend’; it refers to a journey, no more. On the other hand, the verb *poreuomai* is the verb used in the NT to describe Christ’s ascension” (1 Peter, 257). On this view, then, “the three elements of the redemptive event are in view in 3:18–19: the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension” (Jobs, 1 Peter, 242).

⁴⁷ France, “Exegesis in Practice,” 269.

⁴⁸ Aside from Hebrews 12:23, the plural of *pneuma* is used never of humans but only of spirit beings (whether good angels, as in Heb. 1:14; or evil angels, as in Matt. 8:16), and this more than thirty times in the NT. Grudem cites Matthew 27:50 and John 19:30 as instances where *pneuma* is used absolutely of the human spirit, but in both texts *pneuma* is singular, not plural.

second person of the Trinity, before he became human flesh in the person of Jesus, who through or in or by means of the Holy Spirit preached to disobedient people living in the days of Noah just before the flood. Christ was not personally present at that time but by means of the Spirit spoke to them through Noah.⁴⁹

A variation on the notion that “spirits” here refers to human beings argues that it was during the three days between his death and his resurrection that Christ descended into hell and preached to those who were disobedient during the days preceding the flood of Noah. From this some have concluded that he was giving them a second chance to be saved after their deaths.⁵⁰

The most likely view is that Peter has in mind those rebellious angels (demons) who sought unnatural and immoral unions with female humans. This is the incident recorded in Genesis 6:1–5 (cf. the parallel references in 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 6).⁵¹ As punishment for their grievous sin, God consigned them to “prison” to await their final punishment in the lake of fire. It was to these demonic spirits that Christ proclaimed his victory and their judgment, after his resurrection and likely at the time of his ascension.⁵²

Where or of what nature this “prison” might be is not stated by Peter. The likelihood is that the term is used figuratively to make the point that these demonic spirits are in some sense confined or restrained by God until the time of final judgment. “The main point to be established is that there is no mention of going down, or of Sheol or Hades (which is never called *phylakē* [prison] in biblical literature). Christ went to the prison of the fallen angels, not to the abode of the dead, and the two are never equated.”⁵³

But *when* and *in what way* did these “spirits” or “demons” disobey, and why was it important for Jesus to proclaim his victory over them? Two other texts likely refer to this same event (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4–5 and Jude 6–7). Each is probably referring to what we read in Genesis 6:1–5, where “the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive” and “took” them “as their wives.” This was the “sin” (or disobedience; 1 Pet. 3:20a) of those demons referred to, for which they are now confined in prison. This sin was not the original demonic rebellion, for why, then, would only *some* be confined and not all? It cannot be that only the more wicked were permanently confined, for Satan, the most wicked of all, is still free. The context in 1 Peter 3 and 2 Peter 2 (cf. Jude 6) links this “sin” with the flood of Noah, and it is likely that all three passages are referring to the event in Genesis 6.⁵⁴

49 The best defense of this view can be found in Grudem, “Appendix: Christ Preaching through Noah: 1 Peter 3:19–20 in the Light of Dominant Themes in Jewish Literature,” in *First Epistle of Peter*, 203–239, and in John Feinberg, “1 Peter 3:18–20: Ancient Mythology and the Intermediate State,” *WTJ* 48 (October 1986): 303–336.

50 On this, see my comments below on 1 Peter 4:1–6. One must also ask, if a second chance for salvation was being offered, why extend it only to this select group of the physically dead and not to all who died prior to the coming of Christ?

51 Although only of secondary relevance, it is interesting to observe that this is the view taken by the author of 1 *Enoch* 6:1–16:4; 18:12–19:2; 21:1–10; 54:3–6; 64:1–69:29.

52 The clearest and most succinct defense of this view is found in Schreiner, 1, 2 *Peter*, *Jude*, 184–190.

53 France, “Exegesis in Practice,” 271. As noted, “prison” (*phylakē*) is never used of the abode of humans who have died, but is used of the location of Satan and demons (Rev. 18:2 [3x; each of which is translated “haunt” in the ESV]; 20:7).

54 For a more thorough explanation of Genesis 6 and its relevance for 1 Peter 3, see Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2015), 101–109,

The time of this proclamation is clearly indicated in the relative clause with which verse 19 opens: “in which.” Although not overtly temporal in force, its antecedent in verse 18b (“made alive in the spirit”) points to a time subsequent to the resurrection of Christ. What is important to remember is that nothing in this passage suggests that the time of this proclamation was between Christ’s death and resurrection.

Did Christ “preach” the gospel or “proclaim” judgment to the spirits in prison? In favor of the former is the normal use of “herald” (*kēryssō*) in the NT (but cf. Luke 12:3; Rom. 2:21; Rev. 5:2 for exceptions; possibly also Luke 4:19 and 8:39). Elsewhere in 1 Peter the gospel is made known with the verb *euangelizō* (1:12, 25; 4:6), while *kēryssō* appears only this one time in the letter. In support of *kēryssō* denoting a proclamation of judgment is the use of “herald” in the LXX, where the verb often describes the bringing of bad news as well as good. It is also likely that what Christ “proclaimed” was his definitive triumph over and subjugation of “[fallen] angels, authorities, and powers” (v. 22). All were “subjected to him” by virtue of his death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation (cf. Eph. 1:20–22; Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14).

One must also ask what relevance there would be for his readers in the first century in a proclamation of the “gospel” to humans living in the time of Noah. On the other hand, as France has noted, the triumphant declaration to the evil demonic spirits was of immediate practical help to those who were suffering persecution:

They might be called to endure the worst that anti-Christian prejudice could inflict. But even then they could be assured that their pagan opponents, and, more important, the spiritual powers of evil that stood behind them and directed them, were not outside Christ’s control: they were already defeated, awaiting final punishment. Christ had openly triumphed over them. Here is real comfort and strength for a persecuted church which took very seriously the reality and power of spiritual forces.⁵⁵

3:20 Peter’s reference to the “spirits” or demons who disobeyed just before the great flood, as described in Genesis 6, provides the link to his mention of Noah and the building of the ark. Peter sees in Noah’s experience and that of the other seven people with him a pattern or type or prefiguring or foreshadowing of the experience of Christians in his day (and today as well):

- The fewness of the people saved in the ark/the minority to whom Peter is writing
- Noah and his family persecuted and slandered/Peter’s audience persecuted and slandered

185–191; as well as my chapter, “Did Jesus Descend into Hell?” in *Tough Topics 2: Biblical Answers to 25 Challenging Questions* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2015), 63–76.

⁵⁵ France, “Exegesis in Practice,” 272.

- God setting apart Noah and his family in the ark/God setting apart the Christians of the first century and today through baptism

The fallen angels were (and are) in prison “because they formerly did not obey,” that is to say, “when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah.” The period during which God waited patiently falls between the rebellion of the “sons of God” (fallen angels) as described in Genesis 6:1–4 and the flood of Noah (Gen. 7:11), which most believe (based on Gen. 6:3) to have been 120 years, the time during which Noah was building the ark.

Peter’s first-century readers were undoubtedly aware of their small numbers and could easily have been overwhelmed as they compared themselves with the pagan majority around them. Thus they are here reminded that only a “few” (eight persons) were preserved from the judgment of the flood.

The ESV translates the preposition *dia* (followed by the genitive “water”) as local, hence “*through* water.” This is certainly possible, while others argue for an instrumental sense of *dia*, “by means of water.” France is probably correct in pointing out that “the instrumental sense is much easier when one considers the typological application: the Christian is more easily viewed as saved ‘by means of’ the water of baptism than by passing through it, though the latter is also possible. Probably Peter is deliberately exploiting the ambiguity of the word *dia* to assist his passage from the Old Testament story to its typological application.”⁵⁶

3:21–22 The grammar in the opening of verse 21 is difficult. To simplify, we should probably understand it in this way: “which (water) now also saves you, (who) are the antitype (of Noah and his family)—(that is) baptism.” In other words, the experience of Noah and his family in the flood is the type of which Peter’s audience and their baptism is the antitype (*antitypon*). France is especially helpful here:

The essential principle of New Testament typology is that God works according to a regular pattern, so that what he has done in the past, as recorded in the Old Testament, can be expected to find its counterpart in his work in the decisive period of the New Testament. Thus persons, events and institutions of the Old Testament, which in themselves need have no forward reference, are cited as ‘types’, models of corresponding persons, events and institutions in the life of Christ and the Christian church. On this principle, then, . . . Peter takes the salvation of Noah in the flood as a model of the Christian’s salvation through baptism.⁵⁷

Peter immediately qualifies the sense in which baptism saves us: it is not by the physical action itself, in which dirt is removed from the body. In other words, the physical action of baptism has no intrinsic saving power. There is no mechanical relationship between being immersed in water and being forgiven. The only

⁵⁶ Ibid., 273.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 273–274.

sense in which baptism saves, says Peter, is insofar as it provides the occasion for an “appeal to God for a good conscience.”

“Appeal” (ESV) is the translation of *eperōtēma*, which others render as “pledge.” If the former is accurate, the one being baptized “appeals” to God, on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ (or more literally, “through” or “by means of,” if *dia* is instrumental; cf. 1:3), to cleanse one’s conscience and forgive one’s sins.⁵⁸ In good faith or conscience we appeal to God for vindication, that we might be considered part of his victory won by Christ in the resurrection (3:21b). It is only in this light that God uses the water of baptism to save us—as it links us to Christ and his victory and promises.

The focus of verse 22 (based on the language of Ps. 110:1; cf. Acts 2:33; 5:31; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 10:12; 12:2) is the exaltation and ascension of the risen Savior, which signifies his complete subjugation of all fallen and rebellious demonic powers. “Angels, authorities, and powers” is standard NT language for the fallen demonic hosts (Rom. 8:38–39; 1 Cor. 15:24–27; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15). Their subjection to Christ is undoubtedly the content of his proclamation (1 Pet. 3:19).

Response

Peter’s audience was suffering greatly at the hands of their enemies. This entire letter is a call for them to persevere, an encouragement to them not to quit or abandon their faith. Thus Peter’s point here is twofold. First, he reassures them that their unbelieving enemies, and especially the spiritual powers of evil that stood behind those enemies, cannot win! They are not outside of Christ’s sovereign power or control. In fact, they were thoroughly defeated at the cross and resurrection of Christ (cf. esp. Col. 2:14–15). Christ has triumphed over them. Further, he has even gone to the place of their imprisonment and added an exclamation point, as it were, to their defeat, proclaiming to them that he is Lord.

Peter also encourages his readers to persevere by reminding them of what their baptism means. By being baptized they are marked out as God’s chosen few, who, like Noah and his family, will be saved even when all those around them mock and slander them. Baptism is the symbol of their being united with Christ in his resurrection, as well as his defeat of the demonic hosts. Consequently, your baptism is the reminder of the victory in which you stand, the victory that Christ achieved by his death and resurrection and exaltation above all principalities and powers.

Comment

4:1–2 Christians must regularly “arm” themselves (for similar imagery, cf. Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4; Eph. 6:11–17; 1 Thess. 5:8) not with physical weaponry but with a particular attitude or disposition or mind-set when it comes to suffering for their faith. The mental framework required is the same as that seen in Jesus (the

⁵⁸ This entails taking the genitive noun *syneidēseōs agathēs*, “good conscience” (ESV) as objective: one is asking or appealing to God “for” a good conscience, i.e., that one’s conscience might be cleansed of the guilt of sin.

conjunction *oun*, “therefore,” grounds this exhortation in what was earlier said of Christ’s suffering, not only in 1 Pet. 3:18 but also in 2:21–24). Thus, just as Jesus willingly embraced the suffering that a godly life so often provokes, we too must determine, without complaint or bitterness, to endure unjust treatment (especially slander, ridicule, rejection, social ostracism) for identifying with him. On this see especially John 15:18–21.

The reason why (causal *hoti*) believers should embrace this mind-set is that to do so is to “[cease] from sin” (1 Pet. 4:1). Although suffering does purge and refine our faith (1:6–7), Peter does not mean that suffering renders the Christian sinless. Schreiner is surely correct when he says,

Peter emphasized . . . that those who commit themselves to suffer, those who willingly endure scorn and mockery for their faith, show that they have triumphed over sin. They have broken with sin because they have ceased to participate in the lawless activities of unbelievers and endured the criticisms that have come from such a decision. The commitment to suffer reveals a passion for a new way of life, a life that is not yet perfect but remarkably different from the lives of unbelievers in the Greco-Roman world.⁵⁹

To make a break with sin is to resolve not to live the remainder of one’s earthly life for “human passions” (cf. 2:11) but for God’s will. When one suffers for what is right, it is an indication that one has renounced sinful human desires and embraced the will of God as a higher value.

4:3 Here Peter defines more precisely what “human passions” (v. 2) entail. The six terms listed here are all datives of manner expressing the way in which “Gentiles” (i.e., unbelievers, pagans) choose to live.⁶⁰ “Living in sensuality,” or without regard for moral restraint, probably refers to sexual sin. “Passions” (as in v. 2) are cravings or lusts in general, including but not limited to sexual urges. “Drunkenness,” “drinking parties,” and “lawless idolatry” together describe what would occur during times of excessive feasting. The reference to “lawless idolatry” probably means rebellion against both God’s law and civil legislation. This suggests that sensual living is wrapped up in idolatry, in which it is difficult to engage in the former without falling into the latter.

Peter is adamant that “the time that is past suffices” for such behavior. The force of his language is simple: “Enough already!” Instead, believers are to arm themselves with this thought: any degree of past sinning is enough. No one could ever sin so little so as to say, “I need some more time to sin.”

4:4 As sojourners and exiles on the earth, we do not share the values of the world and thus do not fit into the social or moral fabric of the surrounding culture. We

⁵⁹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 201.

⁶⁰ More literally, this is “the will [*boulēma*] of the Gentiles” (in obvious parallel with “human passions” in v. 2). What they “want” for themselves and for others is contrasted with the “will” (*thelēma*) of God (v. 2). This striking juxtaposition reminds us that there are only two standards for life: the human and the divine.

refuse to “join them” or, literally, “run with them,” which points to the urgent and energetic pursuit of any hedonistic excess. “Flood of debauchery” bears the sense of a “rapid outpouring of unrestrained indulgence” or “torrent of sinful behavior” (the obvious reference is to the sins of v. 3). The world’s response is one of both surprise and contempt. They “malign” (lit., “blaspheme”) the believer (although God may also be the object of their disdain). This probably entails some measure of social ostracism as well as verbal slander (cf. 2:12, 15; 3:9, 16; 4:14).

4:5–6 Here we see the eschatological reversal of the believer’s defense of the truth in 3:15. Now it is the unbeliever’s responsibility to provide an account for his behavior (for the same terminology in contexts of personal accountability, cf. Matt. 12:36 and Heb. 13:17). Thus, when a believer suffers for righteousness’ sake, he does not need to resort to sinful vengeance or insist on the last word. God stands ready to settle all accounts, and he will do so far better than we.

Does “the gospel was preached even to those who are dead” (1 Pet. 4:6) mean that the gospel was preached to people who had physically died, giving them a second chance, after death, to believe and be saved? Those who argue for this interpretation suggest that verse 6 is answering a question raised by verse 5: how can God judge those who have never heard the gospel? The answer, they argue, is that God can judge all because all have in fact heard, if not in this life then certainly in the next.

This interpretation is related to a particular understanding of 3:19–22, in which some contend that the “spirits” in prison are human beings who have died, and that Christ went to them between the time of his death and his resurrection to preach the gospel, giving them yet another opportunity to be saved. But as we saw, the “spirits” mentioned there are fallen angelic beings, that is to say, demons, and the proclamation to them is one of judgment, not salvation. Furthermore, in 4:6 it is the “dead” (*nekrois*) who hear the gospel (*euēngelisthē*), not “spirits” (*pneumasin*) to whom a proclamation (*ekēryxen*) is made (as in 3:19).

But even if this theory were correct, what about those who have died *after* Christ’s resurrection without hearing the gospel? If this verse is telling us what was done by Christ during the time between his death and resurrection, when is he supposed to have preached to everyone who has died in the subsequent two thousand years without having heard the gospel? Furthermore, the NT nowhere envisions the possibility of the dead being offered yet another opportunity to be saved (cf. Luke 16:26 and esp. Heb. 9:27).

Peter’s aim has been to encourage Christians to persevere in the face of suffering, to endure when they are mistreated for their faith because they have a future reward of eternal life. But it would hardly motivate these believers to persevere in the face of hardship and trial if the easy road of sin and safety could be overcome after death. “It would make no sense at all,” notes Schreiner, “if he were to shift gears suddenly and promise a second chance to those who have rejected the gospel during this life. If Peter were promising a second chance, the Petrine readers

could not be faulted for concluding that they could deny the faith now and then embrace it after death.”⁶¹

Peter is speaking, rather, of the gospel’s having been preached to Christians who are *now* dead. These people had heard and believed the gospel while they were alive but have subsequently died. Hence the “dead” of 1 Peter 4:6 are people who are physically dead at the time of Peter’s writing this letter. The preaching was that done by Christian ministers and missionaries while those here described as the “dead” were still alive. And, Christ was not the one who preached to them (as was the case in 3:19); rather, in 4:6, he is the content or focus of the message that was preached (“the gospel”). These people were not physically dead when they heard the gospel; they heard the gospel and believed and subsequently died physically.

The pagan scoffers of Peter’s day seemed to have good grounds for their unbelief and their ridicule of Christians. The promised second coming of Christ had not occurred. Meanwhile, Christians were dying physically just like everyone else. Unbelievers viewed the death of believers as proof that there was no advantage in becoming a Christian, because everyone ends up in the grave. Was it in vain, therefore, that the gospel had been preached to people who had since died? No. The gospel was preached to them in order that they might live in the presence of God even though to the eyes of unbelievers they appeared to have suffered the penalty of death and gone the way of all mankind.

We must also take note of the difficult purpose clause in verse 6b: “that (*hina*) though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.” “Flesh” and “spirit” should be understood as they were in 3:18, as a reference to physical earthly life and to resurrection life, respectively. Thus, with regard to their earthly existence, they were judged or evaluated “in the flesh,” i.e., by human standards, “the way people are” (lit., “according to men”; cf. Rom. 3:5; 1 Cor. 3:3; 9:8; 15:32; Gal. 1:11; 3:15), but with regard to the resurrection or heavenly realm they live in accordance with God’s judgment (lit., “according to God”; cf. 1 Pet. 5:2, “as God would have you”). As Mark Dubis puts it, “On the one hand, unbelievers have judged Christians in this mortal life as they have sinfully seen fit; on the other hand, God will also act as he sees fit, vindicating believers through resurrection by the Spirit in the life of the world to come.”⁶²

Response

The most pressing point of application for us in this paragraph is the urgent reminder that “Now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). There is no second chance following death. That God has given hell-deserving sinners any chance at all is an expression of unimaginable mercy. We must press upon all people the necessity of repentance from sin and faith in Christ now, in this life. There may not be a tomorrow.

61 Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 207.

62 Mark Dubis, 1 Peter: A Handbook on the Greek Text (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 138. For a similar contrast see 1 Peter 2:4 (“rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious”).

Comment

4:7 The entire paragraph beginning with verse 7 and ending with the doxology in verse 11 is governed by the realization that “the end of all things is at hand” (v. 7a).⁶³ On three other occasions in the letter Peter directs the reader’s attention to the consummation, when Christ will return for a second time (cf. 1:7, 13; 4:13). Some believe the “end of all things” points to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70. Whereas the events of AD 70 were of great significance, marking the end of the Jewish age and the judgment of God against an apostate nation, it seems strange to speak of it as “the end of *all* things.” One also wonders how the destruction of Jerusalem could be a motivating factor to those living in northern Asia Minor. The recipients of the letter, after all, are largely Gentile believers living in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bythinia (cf. 1:1–2).

The NT writers believed that with Christ’s death, resurrection, and exaltation to the right hand of the Father, the “last days” had dawned (cf. Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:1–2; 1 John 2:18). But Peter did not know if the “last of the last days” or the “end of the end times” would come in his lifetime. Christ’s death and resurrection mark the beginning of the end, although neither Peter nor we know when the end of the end will come.

The inferential conjunction “therefore” (*oun*) reminds us that the primary purpose of eschatological expectation is not only to deepen our confidence in God as the sovereign Lord of history but also to encourage and sustain us in practical righteousness (cf. Rom. 13:11–14; 1 Cor. 15:58; 2 Pet. 3:11–13; 1 John 3:2–3).

Five exhortations follow, two of which in verse 7 are aorist imperatives: “be self-controlled” and “[be] sober-minded.” These are virtually synonymous and should be taken as a doublet, seen in contrast to the excessive feasting and drinking prevalent among unbelievers in verse 3. Both mental alertness and vigilance are essential to effective and sustained intercession: they are “for the sake of your prayers” (v. 7b). Peter is thus calling for what might be called “eschatological clearheadedness.”⁶⁴

4:8 Peter’s use of the present tense requires us to translate this third exhortation as “keep loving.” The mutual love that was already active and real must be sustained (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3). This is reinforced by the adjective translated “earnestly” (*ektenē*), which can also mean “constantly” (something to be perpetuated; the adverbial form has already appeared in relation to our loving one another; 1 Pet. 1:22). Love must never be half-hearted, weak, or self-serving. It must be concentrated, focused, and faithful.

An explicit reason (*hoti*; “since” or “because”) is given for the priority of love beyond that of the nearness of the end: “love covers a multitude of sins” (cf. Prov. 10:12; 1 Cor. 13:4–7; James 5:19–20). Peter is not suggesting that we sweep under the rug every bad thing that happens, or in the name of love let people run

⁶³ The perfect tense of the verb *engizō*, translated “is at hand,” recalls the earlier declarations of the arrival of God’s kingdom in the person of Christ. See Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:14–15; and Luke 10:9 for the use of this same form of the verb (the perfect likely points to the heightened proximity of the event in view).

⁶⁴ Dubis, *1 Peter*, 140.

roughshod over us and others. His point is that when love flourishes, we are not easily offended but are willing to endure injustices. This is the love, notes Carson, “that breaks the downward spiral of wounded sensibilities, hard feelings, nurtured bitterness, dissension, and vendetta.”⁶⁵ To “cover” sins is likely synonymous with forgiveness and the determination to shelter from exposure and condemnation those who have wronged us.

4:9 The fourth of a believer’s ethical responsibilities in view of the “end of all things” is to “show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (v. 9; cf. Rom. 12:13; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; Heb. 13:2). Hospitality was especially important in the first century, when public lodging could not be afforded or was not available. The Christian mission depended on believers’ providing lodging, food, and finances for those traveling with the gospel (Matt. 10:11, 40; Acts 16:15; 3 John 7–11).

Peter’s qualifying phrase “without grumbling” (v. 9b) is clearly called for, as hospitality is demanding. People can take advantage of a host, and we can easily begrudge our charity toward others. “Grumbling” is often provoked by the demands placed on one’s time and resources or perhaps by the ingratitude of a guest. The grumbling might also be against God for having so ordered or arranged our lives that we are exhausted and running short of money because of the needs of those we welcome into our homes.

4:10–11 The final exhortation, still dependent on the impending “end of all things,” is to “serve one another.”⁶⁶ The opening subordinate clause, “as each has received a gift [*charisma*],” reminds us that every Christian has at least one spiritual gift, although no Christian possesses them all. The purpose of every spiritual gift is to serve or build up others in the body (as Paul also declares in 1 Cor. 12:7–10). Such gifts are a trust (we are to be “good stewards” of them) and thus less a privilege than a responsibility before God.

The word “varied” (*poikilēs*), qualifying the “grace”⁶⁷ of God’s gifts, reminds us that although there is only one giver (God), there are a variety of gifts (cf. Rom. 12:6–8; 1 Cor. 12:7–10, 27–31; Eph. 4:11–12). Here the gifts are divided by Peter into two kinds: speaking and serving. Speaking gifts include teaching, prophecy, apostleship, tongues, interpretation of tongues, exhortation, words of knowledge, words of wisdom; serving gifts include giving, leading, administration, mercy, helping, healing, and miracles.

All spiritual gifts, regardless of whether they are speaking or serving, and regardless of whether they are still granted to Christ’s church, are empowered by God’s strength, not our own (cf. 1 Cor. 12:6). The verb “supplies” is found in only one other place in the NT (2 Cor. 9:10), where it likewise points to God’s bounti-

⁶⁵ Carson, “1 Peter,” 1040.

⁶⁶ As we have seen on several occasions in 1 Peter, the participle (*diakonountes*, from the verb *diakoneō*) has the force of an imperative: “serve” one another.

⁶⁷ Peter makes wide and varied use of the term “grace” (*charis*). In 1:10 it points to the salvation we have in Christ; in 1:13 it is the consummation of God’s kindness to us received at the second coming; in 2:19–20 it is the divine approval or blessing that comes with enduring unjust suffering.

ful provision. Everything the Christian man or woman does, if it is to be virtuous and glorifying to God, must be done in light of the fact that God is the one who supplies the strength for everything.

Indeed, God's glory is the goal of "everything," not just of the exercise of spiritual gifts but of all life and ministry (cf. 1 Pet. 2:12; 4:16). That such glory and praise comes to God "through Jesus Christ" reminds us that whatever gifts we might exercise, whatever grace we might experience, and whatever praise we offer to God is grounded upon and mediated through the life, death, and resurrection of the Son.

It is uncertain whether the antecedent of the relative pronoun "him" (v. 11b) is Jesus Christ or God the Father. The proximity of the former is significant. However, God is the focus of verse 11 (being named three times) and is the one who is "glorified" in the preceding clause. It is to him, then, that glory belongs. This doxology is not a wish or a command but a statement of fact: hence the translation of the indicative *estin* (third person singular of *eimi*, to be) as "to him *belong*" glory and dominion forever and ever. More literally we might render this, "To him is the glory and the strength unto the ages of the ages, amen."⁶⁸

Response

Ours is a day filled with eschatological anticipation. Speculation abounds regarding the coming Antichrist, tribulation, the destiny of Israel, and related themes. Peter does not wish to minimize the certainty of Christ's return, but his response to it is one of pastoral urgency. Knowing that the coming of Christ could occur at any time, we are to be self-controlled and sober-minded as we pray without ceasing. The coming consummation of history calls for love, hospitality, and sacrificial service, not wild-eyed panic or the abandonment of Christian community.

1 PETER 4:12–19

¹²Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory¹ and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name. ¹⁷For it is time for judgment to begin

⁶⁸ Some have suggested that the insertion here of a doxology points to its being the original ending of the epistle. But doxologies often appear prior to the formal conclusion of a document (cf. Rom. 11:36; Gal. 1:5; Eph. 3:21; Rev. 1:6; 5:13; 7:12).

at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ¹⁸ And

“If the righteous is scarcely saved,
what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”²

¹⁹ Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.

¹ Some manuscripts insert *and of power* ² Greek *where will the ungodly and sinner appear?*

Section Overview

The theme of endurance through times of undeserved suffering appears yet again in this paragraph. Instead of developing resentment and anger, we are to view such experiences as an opportunity to receive an even greater measure of the Spirit’s manifest presence. When God wills us to suffer at the hands of an angry and unbelieving world, our response must be like that of Christ’s (1 Pet. 2:23): entrusting ourselves into the hands and sovereign good pleasure of our faithful Creator.

Section Outline

- IV. Enduring Trials for the Glory of God (4:12–19)
 - A. Blessed to Suffer for the Glory of God (4:12–14)
 - B. Suffering as a Christian and Not as a Sinner (4:15–19)

Comment

4:12 Peter’s designation of his readers as “beloved” marks a transition in his letter, much as it did in 2:11. It also serves to remind Christians that the suffering they endure does not mean God has abandoned them or holds them in contempt. All who suffer for righteousness’ sake are “beloved” of God!

Whereas non-Christians are “surprised” when believers refuse to join in their debauched behavior (cf. 4:4), Christians must never be “surprised” at the ill behavior of non-Christians toward them (the same word is used in both places). Earlier, in 1:6–7, Peter encouraged his readers as they endured “various trials” designed to test and purify their faith, as if “by fire.” Here again the “fiery trial” is far from random and thus is no cause for surprise; it is designed by God to “test” the quality of one’s commitment to Christ (in 4:19 he will speak of such suffering as “according to God’s will”).⁶⁹

4:13 Instead of showing surprise and resentment when suffering comes, believers are to “rejoice” (from the verb *chairō*). Although in 1:6 a different verb was used (*agalliaō*) to refer to rejoicing despite trials, the sense is the same (in fact, *agalliaō* is used in the

⁶⁹ Suffering, notes Schreiner, is “not a sign of God’s absence, but of his purifying presence” (1, 2 Peter, Jude, 219). Suffering for Christ in some form or degree is thus essential to the formation of Christian character.

second half of 4:13 for the joy Christians will experience at Christ's second coming). The reason for this response is that believers share in the very sufferings of Christ himself. It is not that believers' suffering is redemptive or propitiatory; rather, our suffering is at the hands of those who opposed Christ, as the hostility of the world continues in our day to find its target in those who identify with him.

The purpose of our rejoicing is so "that" (*hina*) when Christ returns and his glory is revealed (cf. 1:7, 13), we may "rejoice and be glad." Here the verb *chairō* (v. 13a) is intensified and heightened by the participial form of *agalliaō* (cf. the pairing of *agalliaō* with the noun *chara* in 1:8). The rendering "rejoice and be glad" (ESV) suggests an overflow of joy, an experience that goes beyond simple delight. We see here once again (cf. 1:3–7, 13) how our eschatological hope of future grace and glory is brought to bear on our present conduct.

4:14 There is yet another reason to persevere under persecution. When believers are insulted, mocked, or slandered for their faith (cf. 2:12; 3:9, 14)—that is to say, "for the name of Christ" (cf. Matt. 5:11)—and they embrace it without compromise or cowardice, "the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon" them (a possible allusion to Isa. 11:2⁷⁰). Peter has in view either an extraordinary experience of the power of the Spirit that provides strength to endure persecution, or the presence of the Spirit that brings a foretaste of the coming eschatological glory (cf. 1 Pet. 1:7; 4:13). If the latter, Peter is saying that when believers are asked by God to endure unjust suffering humbly for Christ's sake, the glory that has yet to be revealed in its consummate and final expression at the end of history has already entered into their experience in advance of that day.

4:15–18 The exhortation of verse 15 is largely an echo of what we saw earlier in 2:19–20 and again in 3:13–17 (the only difference being that here Peter provides four concrete examples of sinful behavior).⁷¹

Those in the early church did not typically call themselves "Christians" (4:16); this was a designation given to them by others (cf. Acts 11:26; 26:28). But clearly Peter thinks of the label as useful, to be embraced with joy and confidence and never in shame (cf. 1 Pet. 2:6). In fact, it is precisely "in that name," in and for the name of "Christian," a follower of Christ, that we are to suffer and thereby glorify God.

If one rejoices in suffering for Christ's sake, one shows that God is gloriously more valuable than the approval of men or the comfort and safety they might provide. If one blesses persecutors instead of retaliating, one shows that God is more than sufficient to satisfy one's longings. The most effective way to demonstrate that God is the preeminent treasure of one's heart is to relentlessly rejoice in him when all other sources of satisfaction are stripped away.

⁷⁰ Isaiah 11 is an explicitly messianic passage. It would appear that "Peter's application of Isa. 11:2 to believers is not some metaphorical extension, still less an argument by analogy, but an application to believers grounded in their real participation in the end-time prophetic fulfillment inaugurated by Christ" (Carson, "1 Peter," 1041).

⁷¹ The word translated "meddler" is used nowhere else in the NT and is the subject of considerable dispute. The likely meaning is a "busybody" or someone who crosses accepted social and cultural boundaries by prying, uninvited, into the affairs of others.

In verse 13 the fiery trial is described as a sharing in “Christ’s sufferings.” In verse 14 one is “insulted for the name of Christ.” And verse 16 describes suffering “as a Christian.” Thus the suffering is due to the fact that believers have openly identified with Christ and joyfully bear his name.

The causal “for” (v. 17) likely has in view all of the suffering described in verses 12–16. The latter is here described as the “judgment” of God. This word (*krima*) need not be taken as punitive or penal here (entailing divine wrath) but as disciplinary, with a view to refining and purifying the moral character of “the household of God” (cf. 1:6–7).

Here Peter argues from the lesser to the greater (*a fortiori*). If even those who will finally be saved are purified and judged by suffering, then surely the outcome or result for those who reject and disobey the gospel will be an even greater suffering. To disobey “the gospel of God” (cf. Mark 1:14; Rom. 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:2, 8, 9) is to reject its call for repentance and faith in Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 2:8).

“Scarcely” in verse 18 might also be rendered “with difficulty” (cf. Prov. 11:31). Peter is not quoting this proverb in order to argue that God finds it difficult to save us, although the price required in Christ’s blood should never be underestimated. His point is that we, God’s people, must enter through the narrow gate, facing opposition and enduring suffering all along the pathway to glory. God’s mode of bringing his people to their final inheritance is through hard and painful discipline. Again, if sin is so hated in God’s sight that even his children are made to suffer discipline so as to purify their souls, what must be the fate of those who disobey the gospel?

4:19 The undeserved suffering previously described is “according to God’s will” (as also in 1:6; 2:19–21; 3:17). All suffering passes through God’s hands. Nothing befalls us that he does not permit or use for our ultimate good. The notion of entrusting or committing one’s soul to God recalls the example of Christ himself in 2:23.

God is here called “Creator” to emphasize his complete and comprehensive sovereignty over the lives of his people and all that they encounter. He is also “faithful” to fulfill his promises. He will never forsake us. He will work all things, even suffering, together for our good and his glory. God never wastes the suffering of his children but rather uses it to conform them to Christ.

Response

We must not dishonor God by thinking that every time we suffer, he has lost control or dropped the reins. Although his ways may often seem strange, our duty is to trust that he is a faithful Creator who has only our best interests at heart. A Christian must never appeal to his suffering as an excuse to sin but should persevere in the pursuit and practice of what is good even while enduring abuse at the hands of his enemies.

To rejoice when we suffer is utterly counterintuitive to the self-protective instincts of mankind and the overwhelming desire for comfort and ease. Only

through the sustaining power of the Spirit and in anticipation of the coming glory of Christ at the consummation will we find strength and joy to suffer in such a way that God is made ever more famous as his majesty is revealed.

1 PETER 5:1–11

5 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ²shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight,¹ not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you;² not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

⁶Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. ⁹Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

¹ Some manuscripts omit *exercising oversight* ² Some manuscripts omit *as God would have you*

Section Overview

The whole of the Christian life as set forth in the first four chapters of 1 Peter must be pursued in the context of community and under the loving authority of elders whom God has raised up to guide, guard, and feed his people. But we must never grow slack or smug in this communal experience, for Satan is ever active in his effort to undermine our confidence in the goodness of God. However much we suffer persecution, and for however long it lasts, we must be encouraged with the assurance that God “will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish” us in his “eternal glory in Christ” (1 Pet. 5:10).

Section Outline

- V. The Responsibilities of the Church in the Midst of Trials (5:1–11)
 - A. The Responsibility of Elders for the Flock of God (5:1–4)

- B. The Responsibility of the Flock of God (5:5–9)
 - 1. Be Humble (5:5–7)
 - 2. Resist the Devil (5:8–9)
- C. The Promise of God and the Praise of God (5:10–11)
 - 1. The Promise of God (5:10)
 - 2. The Praise of God (5:11)

Comment

5:1 The connection (“so”) between the close of 4:19 and the beginning of 5:1 must be noted. Peter anticipated that elders, who constitute the visible leadership of the local church, would likely be the first to endure persecution. The suffering and persecution all believers face (4:12–19) puts a special strain on leaders. They need to understand what is required of them, especially when the sheep are being harassed.

Peter identifies with them as a fellow elder in order to emphasize his understanding of their fears and temptations. He was a “witness” of the sufferings of Christ not because he observed the crucifixion but because he faithfully bore testimony to it (cf. Rev. 2:13; 11:3; 17:6). Although God’s people, including elders, will likely “suffer according to God’s will” (1 Pet. 4:19), they also, like Peter, will share or “partake” in the glory to be revealed when Christ returns (cf. 1:7, 13; esp. 4:13).

In the NT the words “elder” (*presbyteros*) and “bishop” (*episkopos*) describe the same office or authoritative function (as seen, e.g., in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7). “Elder” focuses on the dignity and gravity of the person who serves, while “bishop” (lit., “one who exercises oversight”) focuses on the practical function of the office. All local churches in the NT were governed by a plurality of elders. The NT knows nothing of a local church in which only one elder exercises authority (cf. Acts 11:29–30; 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; James 5:14).

5:2–3 Elders or bishops are also “pastors.” The Greek word *poimēn* is used of pastors only once in the NT, at Ephesians 4:11. However, the related verb form (*poimainō*), meaning “to shepherd” or “feed,” with the idea of nurturing and sustaining the flock of God, is found at Acts 20:28 and here at 1 Peter 5:2 (“*shepherd* the flock”). It is reasonable to conclude that all elders exercise pastoral responsibilities. Whereas Jesus is “the chief Shepherd” (v. 4), he has appointed undershepherds to lead, feed, nurture, and protect God’s “flock” (cf. 2:25).

Here Peter’s focus is less on what elders do and more on how they do it. Three contrasting pairs of phrases (*mē . . . alla* / “not . . . but”) describe both appropriate and inappropriate ways for elders to go about “exercising oversight.”⁷² The three negative attitudes might be summarized as love of praise, love of profit, and love of power.

First, elders are to pastor or oversee the flock of God not “under compulsion, but willingly” (5:2). The impulse to lead must come gladly from within, not oppressively from without. Those who lead should *want* to be elders (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1). “As

⁷² Here we see the participial form of the verb *episkopeō*, to “exercise oversight” or to “take care of.”

God would have you” (1 Pet. 5:2) is more literally “according to God”: we are not free to organize the church according to our preferences but must do so according to God’s revealed will. Forbes rightly points out that such leadership “is to be done as God himself would do it, or . . . in a manner approved by God.” In either case, “The focus is on oversight performed with a due sense of accountability to God.”⁷³

Second, elders must pastor God’s people not “for shameful gain, but eagerly” (v. 2). Peter does not mean that church leaders should not be paid; Paul clearly says that they should be (1 Tim. 5:17–18). It is not “gain” that Peter is denouncing, but “shameful” gain (cf. Titus 1:7).

Third, elders must not “domineer” over those in their charge, but rather ought to be “examples” to them (1 Pet. 5:3). An elder should not be the sort of individual who exploits his position of authority to lord over others, always exerting his power, always demanding rather than serving, always insisting on his way even when he knows he is wrong, always flaunting his position. Instead, elders are to be “examples” to their flock⁷⁴ of humility, self-sacrifice, love for God, passion in worship, generosity, devotion to family, and, most of all, obedience to Jesus in all things.

5:4 In 1 Peter 2:25 Christ was described as the “Shepherd and Overseer” of God’s people, and in Hebrews 13:20 he is the “great shepherd” of the sheep. Peter echoes that language here in calling Christ the “chief Shepherd” of God’s people. In doing so he also stresses, by implied contrast, the submission of all elders to Christ. They are the undershepherds; he is the chief Shepherd.

Peter next articulates the ultimate motivation for humble and deferential service in the body of Christ: those who serve in the way he prescribes “will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4b). Some see this crown as simply another metaphor for salvation in its consummate form (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), while others recognize a particular “reward” that will be given to faithful pastors (cf. 1 Cor. 3:10–15; 9:25; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:8).

The crown in view is not one made of gold, studded with diamonds and other precious jewels, but is an “unfading” (*amarantinon*; lit., “made of amaranths,” which was a “dark red flower known for its resistance to fading”⁷⁵) wreath. This is the only time in the NT that the term “crown/wreath” is linked with “glory” (*doxa*). The genitive construction here could be either of quality, hence a “glorious crown,” or (more likely) epexegetical, “the crown that is glory.” If the latter is the case, then Peter is describing the crown as the eschatological or consummate glory that all faithful believers in Christ will share or experience upon his return (1 Pet. 1:7).

5:5 The imperative “be subject” is identical to the language of 2:13 and its admonition to be subject or submissive to “every human institution.” The single word

73 Forbes, *1 Peter*, 168.

74 In verse 2, Peter said that the “flock of God” is “among you,” and now in verse 3 that it is “in your charge,” or allotted to you. In both cases it would appear that Peter assumes the shepherds know the sheep, that the shepherds are responsible for them (and not others), and that the sheep are accountable to the shepherds. Such would seem to require some expression of formal membership in the local church.

75 Forbes, *1 Peter*, 170.

rendered “you who are younger” has been taken as a reference to new converts to the faith, to younger members of the community (both male and female), to all members of the local church apart from the elders, or, most likely, to younger men. Peter probably singles out the latter because they are perhaps more inclined to rebellion and insubordination to church leadership than those who are older and more mature.

The appeal for humility now extends to everyone in the community (“all of you”), regardless of age or gender (cf. 3:8). The verb translated “clothe yourselves” appears only here in the NT and evokes the image of someone adorning himself with humility. Just as no one would ever appear naked in public, so too we must always be dressed or wrapped in humility in our dealings with one another. This is because God stands against, resists, or opposes those who are proud. Peter cites Proverbs 3:34, just as James does in James 4:6 (cf. Prov. 16:5; Isa. 57:15).

The “grace” God gives to the humble is not saving grace in this context but refers to the sanctifying and empowering presence of the Spirit. This grace is God’s special kindness, his extraordinary blessing, his unique empowerment and enabling presence showered on those who are not already full of their own self-worth.

5:6–7 The exhortation “humble yourselves” is a passive imperative (“be humbled”). Many have found this odd and thus choose to give the imperative the force of the middle voice: “humble yourselves.” Other commentators argue that the command must be linked “to the readers’ situation of persecution and social ostracism. . . . The point is that they must accept the state of humiliation imposed on them . . . , in one sense by unbelievers but in another sense by God.”⁷⁶ Against this second understanding is the relation of verse 6 to verse 7. Some translations end verse 6 with a period and treat verse 7 as an independent statement. But verse 7 is actually a subordinate clause continuing the thought of verse 6 by telling *how* believers are to humble ourselves: “Humble yourselves . . . [by] casting⁷⁷ all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” Not to give our anxieties to God is to be prideful and arrogant.

Of course, none of this makes sense unless God is both powerful and loving—hence the reference to his “mighty hand” (cf. Ex. 3:19; 13:3, 9, 14, 16; Deut. 3:24; 4:34; Ezek. 20:34) and the fact that he “cares for you.” The exaltation in view is one of eschatological reversal. At the second coming of Christ (the “proper time”), the last in this life (the humble) shall be first, while the first in this life (the proud) shall be last.

5:8–9 Casting one’s anxieties on God does not lead to passivity, as Peter quickly reminds us, using two imperatives: “be sober-minded” (cf. 1:13 and 4:7, where the same verb is used) and “be watchful” (an exhortation common when the second coming of Christ is in view; cf. Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:35).

⁷⁶ Ibid., 175.

⁷⁷ The participle is instrumental in force, with a focus on means.

The Devil is here portrayed as the “adversary” of the believer, a term used often of one’s opponent in a law court (cf. Matt. 5:25; Luke 12:58; 18:3) but here more in the sense of an enemy who comes to destroy. The term “devil” (*diabolos*) carries the more literal sense of “slanderer,” here functioning as a proper noun for Satan. The reason for the two imperatives in verse 8 is that the Devil, much like a lion on the prowl for prey, aims to “devour” (cf. Ps. 22:13) followers of Jesus.

Peter does not specify what being devoured means, but verse 9 suggests it would entail a form of “suffering” similar to what other believers are enduring. This would likely include persecution and slander at the hands of unbelievers, and perhaps also imprisonment or even martyrdom (cf. Rev. 2:10).

The apostle commands his readers to “resist” the Devil (for an identical use of the verb, cf. James 4:7). The appointed biblical means of doing so are the armor of God (Eph. 6:10–17), persistent prayer (Eph. 6:18), worship, meditation on and the wielding of God’s Word (Matt. 4:3–11), obedience, and, if need be, verbal rebuke.

The knowledge that one is not alone in this experience (1 Pet. 5:9b) serves to strengthen the resolve of faith and the determination not to yield to Satan’s allure.⁷⁸ However isolated one may feel, says Peter, such an ordeal is not unique but is shared by others “throughout the world.” The verb translated “are being experienced” (*epiteleō*) has the sense of “to finish” or “accomplish” and suggests that a final goal has been achieved. More is involved in standing firm in the faith than simply enduring pagan opposition; there is in some sense an appointed purpose or end wrapped up in the suffering of believers. This is perhaps spelled out in verse 10, where we are assured that, when suffering has ended, believers will enter into God’s “eternal glory in Christ.”

5:10 Although God sovereignly controls our suffering (cf. 4:19), he is still “the God of all grace” (5:10a). Our suffering does not mean he neglects his children, for the “various trials” (1:6) through which he leads us are designed to “result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7). The brevity of suffering (“a little while”; 5:10) is contrasted with the “eternal” duration of glory his grace has secured for us. More than that, by his grace God “himself” (not another, but God “himself”) will personally supply our every need.

The abundant supply of this grace is seen in four things that God himself will do for those who persevere through suffering (all four verbs are in the future tense, highlighting that they are divine promises on which we can rest secure). He will “restore” (repair, equip, supply), “confirm” (establish or permanently fix), “strengthen” (a verb used only here in the NT), and “establish” (set firmly or lay a foundation) us. These four verbs may be the specific ways in which he will “exalt” us (v. 6).

Thus Peter reminds his readers that, although there will be suffering in the comparatively “short” time between the two comings of Christ, the consummation of God’s purpose for us will result in an “eternal” enjoyment of restoration and glory (cf. Paul’s identical theology in 2 Cor. 4:16–18).

⁷⁸ The participle is causal, “because you know.”

5:11 This is a slightly shortened version of the doxology found in 4:11 (cf. comment on 4:10–11). Some manuscripts, no doubt under the influence of 4:11, add “the glory” to “the dominion” God exerts. This doxology is no mere perfunctory declaration, for Peter would have us know that God is stronger and more powerful than Satan, and no weapon formed by the Devil against God’s people can ultimately prevail.

Response

Peter has said much about suffering, and he has provided numerous incentives to remain steadfast in our faith. But nothing can compare with this exalted promise (v. 10) from God himself: he will “restore” what has been lost, damaged, or wounded; he will “confirm” us in the grace that is ours in Christ; he will “strengthen” us to endure; and he will “establish” us as immovable in his eternal and unbreakable love. Be encouraged!

1 PETER 5:12–14

¹²By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it. ¹³She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. ¹⁴Greet one another with the kiss of love.

Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

Section Overview

Peter has come to the conclusion of what he considers a “brief” letter. His closing exhortation is simple and to the point: what he has written, not another gospel or the counsel of self-professed “wise” men, is “the true grace of God.” It is where we must stand. It is what we must believe. It is the abiding strength of our lives and the source of “love” among believers.

Section Outline

- VI. Concluding Remarks (5:12–14)
 - A. The Purpose of the Letter (5:12)
 - B. Final Greetings (5:13–14)

Comment

5:12 The preposition rendered “by” could just as easily be translated “through” (*dia* with the genitive; cf. Acts 15:23). There is considerable dispute as to whether

Peter is identifying the person who carried and delivered the letter to its intended audience or whether he is indicating that Silvanus⁷⁹ served as his secretary. Then again, both may be true, as Silvanus may well have penned the letter under Peter's oversight and then physically delivered it to the "elect exiles of the Dispersion" (1:1). For more on this issue, see the Introduction.

Two participles ("exhorting" and "declaring") express Peter's purpose for writing the letter. The first points to his instruction concerning how to live faithfully in a pagan environment, while the second highlights Peter's role in "bearing witness" to God's gracious and saving work in and through Jesus Christ.

The specific content of Peter's exhortation and proclamation is "that this is the true⁸⁰ grace of God." The antecedent of "this" is not clear, but the entire letter is likely in view. Thus the exhortation to "stand firm in it" is one final call for belief in and obedience to everything Peter has written (cf. Rom. 5:2; 1 Cor. 15:1; Phil. 4:1).

5:13 The "she" who sends her greetings is not Peter's wife but the Christian congregation as a whole that is present with Peter as he writes. The church is portrayed as "likewise chosen" or, more literally, as the one who is "fellow elect" or "chosen with" (*syneklektē*). The cognate term *eklektē* is used in much the same way to identify fellow Christians in 2 John 1, 13. The reference to the church as "chosen" or "elect" corresponds to the "elect" nature of the exiles in 1:1, thereby framing the entire letter around the theme of God's sovereign choice.

"Babylon" is probably a coded reference to Rome, functioning here as a "metaphor for displacement and alienation."⁸¹ In this way Peter identifies with his readers: just as they are aliens and exiles, so too he writes from a place that is not his home. We thus see two expressions framing the letter: the "elect" of God in "exile" at the beginning, paralleled by Peter's presence among the "chosen" in "Babylon," a foreign city, at the end.

Peter also sends greetings from "Mark, my son." There is no reason to think that this Mark⁸² is Peter's biological child. Paul likewise often referred to other Christians as his spiritual children (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Philem. 10). This reference reminds us again of the close relationship between Mark and Peter (and perhaps explains Peter's influence on the composition of Mark's Gospel account).

5:14 A "kiss of love" in the ancient world was a common sign of affection and devotion among family members, both biological and spiritual (cf. Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26). It is entirely in keeping with Peter's repeated

⁷⁹ This Silvanus is probably the same Silvanus mentioned often in Paul's letters (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). He is called Silas, a shortened version of Silvanus, in Acts (Acts 15:22, 32).

⁸⁰ Some suggest that the emphasis of this word is not so much on truth as opposed to falsehood, but on that which is reliable or trustworthy, over against what might mislead or come to naught (cf. John 5:31–32; 21:24; Titus 1:13; 3 John 12). Both ideas may in fact be involved.

⁸¹ Forbes, *1 Peter*, 185.

⁸² For other references to Mark in the NT, cf. Acts 12:12; 13:4–13; 15:37–39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24.

emphasis in the letter on the love that all Christians are to have for one another (cf. 1 Pet. 1:22; 2:17; 3:8).

The omission of a verb in prayer wishes is common in the NT, as we see similar expressions in Paul's letters (1 Cor. 16:24; 2 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 6:24; Phil. 4:23). Peter's focus on "peace" and omission of "grace" may be his way of highlighting the unique importance of spiritual serenity in the face of constant persecution and ostracism. In any case, his prayer is that peace would be the common experience of all Christians. Contrary to our way of concluding letters today, this is no literary formality but an intercessory cry that longs for his readers to experience the peace of God himself in their hearts (cf. Phil. 4:7).

Response

There is only one appropriate response as we come to the end of Peter's letter. We must, by his power and for his glory, "stand firm" in the glorious grace that is ours in and through Jesus Christ.

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2 PETER

Matthew S. Harmon

INTRODUCTION TO 2 PETER

Overview

Second Peter is arguably the most neglected book in the NT, despite being written by one of the most important figures of the early church. Yet those who ignore it do so at their own peril. Every generation of believers must heed its warnings against false teaching and its call to pursue godliness intentionally in anticipation of Christ's return.

Author

The author identifies himself as "Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:1). Originally a fisherman from Bethsaida (John 1:44), by the time of Jesus' early ministry Peter lived in Capernaum (Mark 1:29). He was part of Jesus' inner circle, along with James and John, the sons of Zebedee (Mark 9:2). Peter was a key leader in the early church (Matt. 16:18) despite his having denied Jesus just before his crucifixion (Mark 14:66–72). God used Peter to preach the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–41) and to the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18). After his miraculous escape from death row in a Jerusalem prison (Acts 12:1–17), Peter spent the next two decades traveling throughout the Roman Empire, preaching the gospel in places such as Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12) and Syrian Antioch (Gal. 2:11). By the time he wrote 1 Peter (early 60s AD), he was ministering in Rome, where he was martyred during the reign of Nero, sometime around AD 64–67.

Despite its direct claim to having been authored by Peter (2 Pet. 1:1), some within the early church questioned whether Peter wrote this letter. Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.3.1–4; 3.25; 6.25.8) listed it among the disputed books. Today many critical scholars reject Petrine authorship, usually for a combination of three reasons. First, they argue that the language, style, and concepts of the letter do not fit what we know of Peter and, furthermore, are radically different from 1 Peter. Second, they claim that the situation described by the letter and the nature of the false teaching demands a date after Peter's lifetime. Third, the sources used (noncanonical Jewish literature/traditions, possibly Jude) and similarities to later Christian writings (*Shepherd of Hermas*, 1–2 *Clement*) show that Peter did not write this letter.

None of these objections is ultimately persuasive. We simply do not have a large enough sample of Peter's writings or know enough about his life to assert authoritatively that Peter could not have written this letter. Differences in language, style, and concepts may have been the result of using a different secretary or addressing a different audience. Furthermore, neither the false teaching nor the situation implied by the letter demands a date after Peter's lifetime. Claims to the contrary often rest on two unproven premises: (1) the erroneous assumption that the false teaching is Gnosticism, and (2) misinterpretation of references to the apostles (2 Pet. 3:1–2). Similarities with early Christian writings can just as easily be understood as those references' dependence on 2 Peter.

The bottom line is that the letter claims to be written by Peter, who asserts his authority as an eyewitness of the life and ministry of Jesus (1:16–18). Arguments to the contrary are not sufficient to overturn this claim.¹

Date and Occasion

Peter writes this letter because he expects that he will die soon (1:12–15; cf. Author). This would suggest that Peter writes sometime between AD 64 and 67.

Peter does not identify the recipients of the letter. If 1 Peter was the first letter he wrote to the recipients (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1), then he is writing to churches “in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1). But the differences between 1 and 2 Peter may suggest different recipients. Ultimately, we cannot be sure who the recipients are, although the description of the false teachers suggests a specific congregation or group of churches is in view.

Whoever the recipients are, they are dealing with false teachers who deny Christ through their immoral living (2 Peter 2). These false teachers are greedy, are sexually immoral, reject God's authority, and are ruled by their sinful desires. They are like irrational animals that follow their natural impulses, slaves to their sinful passions who paradoxically promise freedom to their followers. They scoff at the promise of Christ's return and deny the coming judgment at the end of human history (3:1–13). Beyond these descriptions, we can only speculate about their identity.²

Genre and Literary Features

The opening verses (1:1–2) make it clear that 2 Peter includes the three basic elements of ancient epistolary writing: an opening, main body, and closing. But there are elements of another literary genre in the letter as well: the testament. In the ancient world, testaments recorded the last words of key figures, usually with an emphasis on eschatology and ethics. A number of Jewish writings claimed to contain the final words of men such as Abraham, the twelve sons of Jacob, and Job. Like Paul's final words to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–34) or in 2 Timothy, this

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 255–276.

² See discussion in Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 150–159.

letter records Peter's final words in light of his impending death without being a testament in a formal sense.³

Peter uses a rich vocabulary, including a number of words found nowhere else in the NT. He regularly employs word pairs (e.g., "calling and election," 2 Pet. 1:10; "power and coming of our Lord," 1:16), and Hellenistic language and concepts dominate the letter ("divine nature," 1:4; "virtue," 1:5–6). Peter draws examples from the OT (2:4–9, 15–16, 22) and uses vivid imagery (often drawn from nature) to drive home his points (2:12–14, 17–18).

The obvious overlap between Jude and 2 Peter 2:1–3:3 can be explained in several possible ways: (1) Peter used Jude; (2) Jude used Peter; (3) both used a common source. While most scholars today conclude that Peter used Jude, the evidence is not convincing enough to exclude the other possibilities. Accordingly, no exegetical decisions should be based on one's conclusion on this question, although comparing the passages that overlap may provide some interpretive insight.

Theology of 2 Peter

While all three members of the Trinity are mentioned in this letter, the Son takes center stage. Jesus Christ is referred to repeatedly as "Lord and Savior" (1:11; 2:20; 3:2, 18). Titles such as "Lord" (1:2, 8, 14, 16) and "Master" (2:1) stress the absolute authority of Jesus. This does not mean the Father and Spirit have no part in the letter: God the Father demonstrated throughout the OT his power to judge the wicked and preserve the godly (2:4–10), and he testified to Jesus' identity as the beloved Son (1:17). The Holy Spirit "carried along" the OT prophets, who spoke from God (1:21).

God's word has a prominent role in 2 Peter. The divine origin of the OT prophets' words was confirmed by the events in Jesus' life, making the Scriptures a reliable guide for believers. Prophetic and apostolic utterances do not result from capricious interpretation (1:16–21). The words of the apostles have the same level of authority as the OT (3:2–3, 15–16). Both the first heavens and earth and the new heavens and earth come into existence through God's word (3:5–7, 13).

The "day of the Lord" is another important concept in 2 Peter. It will come suddenly and unexpectedly, resulting in the devastation of the present heavens and earth and the ushering in of a new heavens and earth (3:8–13). God will judge the ungodly, but the faithful will be saved (2:9–10; 3:4–13).

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

Second Peter addresses believers who have already been saved through the work of Christ on the cross but who await the consummation of their redemption in a new heavens and earth. As they wait for Christ's return, their lives should be marked by holiness and godliness (3:11–13).

³ See discussion in Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 145–149; and Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 164–168.

Preaching from 2 Peter

Eschatology shapes ethics. Our belief in Christ's return should shape our daily lives, motivating our pursuit of holiness (3:11–13). Preaching from 2 Peter provides opportunity to alert believers to the dangers of false teaching and persistent ungodly living. Preaching from 2 Peter should encourage intentional pursuit of spiritual growth, for God “has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (1:3).

Interpretive Challenges

See Introduction to Jude: Interpretive Challenges

Outline

- I. Letter Opening (1:1–15)
 - A. Salutation (1:1–2)
 - B. The Power of the Gospel for Life Transformation (1:3–11)
 - C. The Necessity of Being Reminded of the Gospel (1:12–15)
- II. Letter Body (1:16–3:13)
 - A. The Foundation of the Gospel (1:16–21)
 - 1. Witnesses of the Transfiguration (1:16–18)
 - 2. The Confirmation of OT Prophecy (1:19–21)
 - B. The Danger of False Teachers (2:1–22)
 - 1. The Certainty of False Teachers Coming (2:1–3a)
 - 2. The Certain Condemnation of the False Teachers (2:3b–10a)
 - 3. Description of the False Teachers (2:10b–22)
 - C. The Promise of Christ's Return (3:1–13)
 - 1. False Teachers Deny the Return of Christ (3:1–7)
 - 2. The Certainty of Christ's Return (3:8–10)
 - 3. Response: Pursue Holiness in Anticipation of Christ's Return (3:11–13)
- III. Letter Closing (3:14–18)
 - A. Be Diligent (3:14)
 - B. Count God's Patience's as Salvation (3:15–16)
 - C. Take Care (3:17)
 - D. Grow in the Grace and Knowledge of Christ (3:18)

2 PETER 1:1–15

1 Simeon¹ Peter, a servant² and apostle of Jesus Christ,
To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the
righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ:

²May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and
of Jesus our Lord.

³His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and
godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to³ his own glory
and excellence,⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very
great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the
divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world
because of sinful desire. ⁵For this very reason, make every effort to supple-
ment your faith with virtue,⁵ and virtue with knowledge, ⁶and knowledge
with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness
with godliness, ⁷and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly
affection with love. ⁸For if these qualities⁶ are yours and are increasing,
they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of
our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted
that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former
sins. ¹⁰Therefore, brothers,⁷ be all the more diligent to confirm your
calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.
¹¹For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the
eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

¹²Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though
you know them and are established in the truth that you have. ¹³I think
it right, as long as I am in this body,⁸ to stir you up by way of reminder,
¹⁴since I know that the putting off of my body will be soon, as our Lord
Jesus Christ made clear to me. ¹⁵And I will make every effort so that after
my departure you may be able at any time to recall these things.

¹Some manuscripts *Simon* ²For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface

³Or *by* ⁴Or *virtue* ⁵Or *excellence*; twice in this verse ⁶Greek *these things*; also verses 9, 10, 12 ⁷Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters* ⁸Greek *tent*; also verse 14

Section Overview

Peter begins the letter in three sections. After an initial greeting (2 Pet. 1:1–2), he offers a mini-sermon that summarizes his apostolic message (1:3–11). That message has three parts: because God has provided Christians everything necessary for a godly life (1:3–4), they must intentionally pursue growth in spiritual maturity (1:5–9) in order to confirm their election and ensure their entrance into the kingdom on the last day (1:10–11). The final section of the letter’s opening

expresses Peter's intent to remind believers of these truths because his death is near (1:12–15).

Section Outline

- I. Letter Opening (1:1–15)
 - A. Salutation (1:1–2)
 - B. The Power of the Gospel for Life Transformation (1:3–11)
 - C. The Necessity of Being Reminded of the Gospel (1:12–15)

Comment

1:1–2 The author identifies himself with two names and two titles. He is “Simeon,” an alternative spelling of “Simon” (Acts 15:14). This Aramaic name means “[God has] heard.” He is known also as “Peter,” a nickname given by Jesus (Matt. 16:18) that means “rock.” This was a Greek equivalent to one of his other names, Cephas, which comes from the Aramaic word for “rock” (John 1:42). By designating himself as a “servant” (*doulos*), Peter signals that he is under the complete authority of his master, Jesus Christ. He may also have in view his special role in redemptive history, like other servants of the Lord before him (Moses, Joshua, David, the suffering servant). In a general sense, an “apostle” was someone sent as a messenger or delegate (Phil. 2:25), but here it refers to Peter's special status as an authoritative witness of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection (Mark 3:13–19; Acts 1:21–22).

The recipients are “those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours.” The rare verb rendered “obtained” (*lanchanō*) suggests that the divine will stands behind what is received (Luke 1:9; Acts 1:17)⁴ and perhaps anticipates the reference to God's calling and election in 2 Peter 1:10. While one might assume that the apostles had a special kind of faith that set them apart from “ordinary” believers, Peter insists that all Christians have “a faith of equal standing.” All believers stand on level ground at the foot of the cross.

Believers receive this faith “by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” Although the expression “righteousness of God” has a variety of nuances, here it probably refers to God's saving work on behalf of his people that flows out of his righteous, promise-keeping character and results in right standing for his people before him. What makes this particular occurrence of the phrase unusual is its explicit reference to the righteousness of “Jesus Christ.” Peter leaves no doubt as to who Jesus Christ is—he is “our God and Savior.”⁵ As believers, we have the privilege of calling Jesus Christ *our* God and Savior.

Next Peter moves to the greeting. By combining “grace” (*charis*) and “peace” (*eirēnē*), the early Christians appear to have adapted the standard Greek (*chairein*) and Jewish (*shalom*) greetings. Grace refers to the undeserved blessing and favor that God bestows on sinners. At times it seems to function as shorthand for all that

⁴ BDAG, s.v. λαγχάνω (1).

⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 276–277.

God has done for his people in Christ. Peace must be understood in light of its OT background. It means not merely the cessation of hostility but also wholeness or completeness. Often in the OT Prophets it is a one-word shorthand for the condition produced by God's eschatological salvation (Isa. 32:15–18; 48:18; 52:7; 53:5; 54:10). Peace is both a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) and a byproduct of a mind fixed on the Spirit (Rom. 8:6). Peter does not want us to be content with the measure of grace and peace we have already experienced through the gospel, so he prays for even more to be “multiplied” to us.

Grace and peace may be multiplied to us “in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” While the word translated “knowledge” (*epignōsis*) can suggest a full or complete knowledge, here it may refer specifically to the knowledge that follows conversion.⁶ Peter ends the letter with a similar expression (2 Pet. 3:18), showing that everything he writes promotes a deeper relational knowledge “of God,” which in this context refers to the Father, and “of Jesus our Lord.” One cannot truly know the Father without knowing the Son (John 14:7). As our covenant maker and keeper, the Lord Jesus deserves our full allegiance and submission.

1:3–4 In Greek, verses 3–7 are one sentence reminding believers of the blessings God has given them and the proper way to respond. Our ongoing experience of the blessings enumerated in verses 3–4 depends on God's grace and peace being multiplied to us by knowing God through Jesus Christ. The source of these blessings is God's “divine power.” The same divine power that created the universe (Gen. 1:1) and was displayed in Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:16) has also “granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness.” The perfect tense of “granted” (*dōreomai*) signals that believers are in a state/condition produced by this gift. The gift includes “all things” that pertain to life and godliness; nothing the believer needs has been excluded. “Life” refers to eternal or spiritual life, which all who know Jesus Christ experience now (John 17:3) in anticipation of its fullness in a new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:13). “Godliness” is a Godward orientation of life expressed in thoughts, feelings, attitudes, speech, and action; it should characterize our lives as believers (3:11) and is a prominent theme in Paul's Pastoral Epistles as well.⁷ “Godliness” captures the first and greatest commandment, to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). Peter's point is that God has given us absolutely *everything* necessary for us to know him and to live in a way that honors him.

God grants his people everything they need for life and godliness “through the knowledge of him who called us.” The Father calls believers into a saving knowledge of the truth (1 Pet. 1:15; 2:9; 5:10). Although his own glory and excellence could be what God calls us *to*, it seems more likely that they are the means *by which* he calls us (ESV mg.). “Glory” refers to the manifestation of God's perfections and beauty; it is the ultimate motivation for all that God does (2 Pet. 3:18). “Excellence” (*aretē*)

⁶ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 288.

⁷ First Timothy 2:2; 3:16; 4:7–8; 6:3–6, 11; 2 Timothy 3:5; Titus 1:1.

further emphasizes God's perfection.⁸ Through the display of God's glory and excellence in Jesus Christ, God calls people into a saving knowledge of himself.

It is "by" God's glory and excellence that "he has granted to us his precious and very great promises." God's glory and excellence are thus not only the means by which he calls us to himself (1:3) but also the means (or perhaps even the cause) by which he gives us his promises. Exodus 33–34 helps explain Peter's logic. In response to Moses' request to see God's glory (Ex. 33:18), God passes before Moses proclaiming his name, *Yahweh*, which is further unpacked in terms of his identity as one who is full of mercy, grace, steadfast love, and forgiveness while at the same time being fully just in punishing the guilty (Ex. 34:6–7). Thus what makes God so glorious and excellent is that he forgives sin while remaining just. Because this is who he is, God gives us his promises. Although Peter does not specify which promises are in view, there may be some emphasis on those promises that deal specifically with God's cleansing his people from their sin (Jer. 31:31–34) and empowering them by the Spirit to walk in obedience to him (Ezek. 36:26–27)—i.e., the promises of the new covenant. These promises are "precious and very great." They are of the utmost value.

Both the purpose and the result of God's giving these promises is that "through them you may become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). A "partaker" is one who shares with another in something, which in this case is the "divine nature." Peter does not speak here in ontological categories, as if believers become a new sort of hybrid creature that is part human and part divine. Instead, he means the restoration of the image of God. Through Adam's sin, the image of God in humanity was horribly distorted (Rom. 5:12–21), like the reflection of a funhouse mirror. But through God's precious and very great promises in the gospel, the Spirit begins to transform believers so that they more clearly reflect the likeness of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28–30), who is the image of God (Heb. 1:3).

The next clause confirms this conclusion: "having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire" (2 Pet. 1:4). The verb "escaped" (*apopheugō*) is unique to 2 Peter (1:4; 2:18, 20) in the NT. Whereas in 2:18 it refers to escaping from false teachers, here and in 2:20 it refers to escaping the corruption of this fallen world. Believers escape from corruption in conjunction with partaking in the divine nature. When a person is born again, there is a decisive break from the corruption of this world and a turning to Christ through the promises in the gospel that begins restoring the marred image of God in us. In 2 Peter, "corruption" characterizes false teachers (2:12) and those enslaved to their teaching (2:19). Sin is a corrosive agent causing the disintegration of God's good created order. Such corruption is rooted in "sinful desire" that turns us inward to ourselves rather than upward to God and outward to others.

1:5–7 Because of the realities expressed in verses 3–4 ("For this very reason"), Peter now calls his readers to further action. The "faith" that believers have in

⁸ Peter may echo the language of Isaiah 42:8, 12 (LXX), where the two Greek words for glory (*doxa*) and excellence (*aretē*) appear together to stress Yahweh's uniqueness.

God's promises forms the foundation for continuing spiritual growth; from that starting point they are to "supplement" their faith with a series of character qualities. As used here, this verb (*epichorēgeō*) means to "provide at one's own expense."⁹ Pursuing growth in holiness requires an investment of our time, resources, and energy. It must not be approached casually but requires Christians to "make every effort" to see these qualities produced in their lives. This expression communicates intentionality, passion, and diligence. One does not drift into greater measures of Christlikeness; intentional, Spirit-empowered effort must be exerted.

The character qualities one must add to faith form a series of building blocks in which each new quality is added to the previous one.¹⁰ So to faith the believer adds "virtue" (*aretē*), a term used widely in Greco-Roman philosophical circles for moral, intellectual, or even physical excellence.¹¹ In the NT this word refers to either the excellencies/perfections of God (1 Pet. 2:9; 2 Pet. 1:3) or his excellencies reflected in the way his people live (here; Phil. 4:8). As those in a covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the Spirit empowers us both to proclaim God's excellencies (1 Pet. 2:9) and to reflect them in our own daily lives.

To virtue believers are to add "knowledge." Peter has in view far more than merely an intellectual grasp of the truth. He refers to relational knowledge of a person—Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18). In addition, there are truths that must be known and acted on, referenced throughout this letter. Readers must beware that "no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation" (1:20). They must know and pursue "the way of righteousness" (2:21). They must recognize that "scoffers will come in the last days" (3:3). They must realize that the ignorant and unstable twist Scripture "to their own destruction" (3:16).

To knowledge the believer must add "self-control" (*enkrateia*), which is the "restraint of one's emotions, impulses, or desires."¹² In both Jewish and Christian writings, this quality is commonly associated with refraining from certain behaviors, especially illicit sexual activity.¹³ Greek philosophy (especially the Stoics) regarded self-control as a key virtue.¹⁴ But the biblical concept of self-control is not mastery of ourselves by our own power; it is submission to God and surrender of control to the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:23–25).

To self-control the Christian must add "steadfastness" (*hypomonē*), which is "the capacity to hold out or bear up in the face of difficulty."¹⁵ As a product of suffering, steadfastness leads to proven character (Rom. 5:3–4). God gave us Scripture to produce endurance in us as we learn from those who have gone before (Rom. 15:4–5). Steadfastness is especially common in Revelation, where God's people are

9 BDAG, s.v. ἐπιχορηγέω (2).

10 Peter uses a literary device called *sorites*, which is a chain of building blocks where each element builds upon the previous one (cf. another instance in Rom. 5:3–5). For a helpful comparison with other examples in Scripture and Jewish literature, see Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 177–178. While it is significant that the list begins with faith and culminates in love, there appears to be no clear logical ordering of the elements in between.

11 TDNT, 1:458–460; NIDNTT, 3:925–926.

12 BDAG, s.v. ἐγκράτεια.

13 See *Testament of Issachar* 2:1; *Testament of Naphtali* 8:8; Philo, *Quod deterius potiori insidari soleat* 1.101; *De specialibus legibus* 2.195; 1 *Clement* 38:2; 2 *Clement* 15:1.

14 TDNT, 2:340–341; NIDNTT, 1:494.

15 BDAG, s.v. ὑπομονή (1).

called to endure as they live in a fallen world opposed to God and his purposes (Rev. 1:9; 2:2–3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12).

To steadfastness one must add “godliness” (*eusebeia*), on which see comment on 2 Peter 1:3–4.

Believers must add “brotherly love” to godliness. Because we are members of God’s family, we should love one another. Such brotherly love is a byproduct of obeying the truth of the gospel (1 Pet. 1:22) and must be intentionally pursued (Rom. 12:10; Heb. 13:1). Peter elsewhere commands believers to “love the brotherhood” (1 Pet. 2:17) and lists such brotherly love as a key mark of the church (1 Pet. 3:8).

The final virtue to be added is “love.” Love’s position at the end of the list is no accident; in 1 Peter 4:8 the apostle writes, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins” (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1–13; Col. 3:14). Peter may have in mind Jesus’ words in John 13:34–35: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Biblical love is not a feeling provoked by the beauty of its object but rather is a commitment of the heart, mind, and soul to pursue what is best for the one being loved. Our love for others should reflect the self-sacrificial love of Christ, who laid down his life so that we might know the Father. The Spirit of that same Christ lives in us as believers to empower us to love God and others in the way he himself did.

1:8 With the building blocks of spiritual growth described, Peter now moves to draw out their implications. He invites his readers to consider whether “these qualities” (the virtues of 1:5–7) “are yours and are increasing.”¹⁶ “Increasing” (*pleonazō*) is often used in connection with the growth of various virtues, such as grace (Rom. 6:1), love (1 Thess. 3:12), and faith (2 Thess. 1:3). The sense here in 2 Peter 1:8 is not just increasing, but increasing “so as to be in abundance.”¹⁷

The virtues of 1:5–7 are the means by which the Holy Spirit continually prevents the believer from being “ineffective” (*argos*), a word that describes those who are idle (Matt. 20:3, 6; 1 Tim. 5:13; Titus 1:12), usually with a negative connotation. James uses this same word to describe faith apart from works (“useless [*argē*]”; James 2:20). To be “ineffective” is to lack power or activity.

The qualities of 1:5–7 also prevent the believer from being “unfruitful.” Fruit is a common image for the outworking of a person’s inner life, revealing the true condition of one’s heart (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:7–8; Matt. 3:8; 7:15–20; 12:33–37; Luke 6:43–45). Those who are united to Christ, the true vine, will bear fruit that abides (John 15:1–17) as the Spirit produces fruit in his or her life (Gal. 5:22–23).

The phrase “in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” indicates the “reference point” for the pursuit of effective fruitfulness in the Christian life. At the

¹⁶ Peter uses two present tense participles with a conditional force to portray the actions as continuous.

¹⁷ BDAG, s.v. πλεονάζω (1).

beginning of this section (1:3–11), Peter identified “the knowledge of him who called us” as the means by which God gives believers “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (1:3). The Spirit producing the qualities of 1:5–7 in the Christian renders the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ both effective and fruitful, which is God’s intended goal.

1:9 Whereas the previous verse explains what happens if the virtues of 1:5–7 are present and increasing, verse 9 notes what happens to “whoever lacks these qualities.” First, such a person “is so nearsighted that he is blind.” The word “nearsighted” (*myōpazō*) means blinking or squinting the eyes repeatedly and thus by extension refers to one who is nearsighted.¹⁸ Because such people willfully close their eyes, they are in effect spiritually “blind.”¹⁹ By missing the qualities described in 1:5–7, they are blind, lacking the spiritual insight that would have produced the fruit of good works. Blindness is a common image in Scripture for a lack of spiritual understanding (Isa. 6:9; 42:18–19). God had promised to heal the blind as a sign that redemption had come (Isa. 29:18; 35:5), and he had called Israel as his servant to be “a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind” (Isa. 42:6–7), but God’s people themselves had become blind instead (Isa. 42:18–19). So God promised to raise up a new servant to obey where Israel had failed (Isa. 49:1–13; 61:1–2). Thus, Jesus’ healing those who were physically blind was an enacted parable of his greater purpose of opening spiritual eyes to embrace the salvation he brought (Matt. 11:2–15; John 9:1–41). But the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were still “blind”; instead of leading people to the light of salvation, they remained in darkness (Matt. 23:16–26; John 9:40–41; Rom. 2:19).

Second, the person who lacks the qualities described in 2 Peter 1:5–7 has “forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.” Throughout history, God’s people have been prone to forget who he is and what he has done for us, so Scripture regularly calls us to remember his mighty acts (Deut. 5:15; 8:18; Eph. 2:11–12; 2 Tim. 2:8). To be “cleansed” (*katharismos*) evokes the idea of purification, a concept tied in the OT to both ceremonial cleanness (Lev. 12:1–8) and forgiveness of sins (Lev. 16:30; Jer. 33:8). The NT applies this language both to the forgiveness believers already have through Jesus’ work on the cross (Eph. 5:26; Heb. 10:22) and to the ongoing work of God to remove the presence and pollution of sin in our lives (2 Tim. 2:21; James 4:8; 1 John 1:9).

1:10–11 Peter now draws a conclusion based on 1:3–9.²⁰ By calling his readers “brothers” (*adelphoi*), Peter reminds them of their identity as siblings who have God as their Father and Jesus as their brother. But rather than issue a new command, he essentially recalls the imperative of verse 5: “be all the more diligent.” This verb (*spoudazō*) is related to the noun (*spoudē*), which in 1:5 is translated “effort”; it means

¹⁸ See BDAG, s.v. μυωπάζω. The disease in view was probably equivalent to ophthalmia, which produces a discharge from the eyes (Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 198).

¹⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 48.

²⁰ Peter uses a forceful, albeit uncommon, expression (*dio mallon*; rendered “therefore”) to signal his conclusion. It highlights a contrast with the negative outcome expressed in verse 10.

“to be especially conscientious in discharging an obligation”²¹ and frequently occurs in contexts calling the believer to pursue different aspects of a holy life (Gal. 2:10; Eph. 4:3; Heb. 4:11). Pursuit of a life reflecting the character of Christ demands a Spirit-empowered urgency, which stems from living in the last days as we await the consummation of God’s promises (2 Pet. 3:14).

Diligence must be channeled “to confirm your calling and election.” Peter uses language that stresses the proven validity of something.²² In legal contexts, to “confirm” referred to producing “a legally valid confirmation of the sale and therefore a guarantee.”²³ In 1:19 this verb’s adjectival form (*bebaios*) describes the proven validity of the prophetic word. That which must be confirmed is the believer’s “calling and election.”²⁴ “Calling” (*klēsis*) and its related verb (*kaleō*) often refer to God’s sovereign appointment of nations (Rom. 11:29) or individuals (1 Cor. 1:1) to a particular role or status. For example, because the God who calls believers is holy, believers must be holy (1 Pet. 1:15–17); Christians have been called out of darkness into light to proclaim God’s excellencies (1 Pet. 2:9) as well as to suffer (1 Pet. 2:21; 3:9); Paul instructs the Ephesians “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (Eph. 4:1). “Election” regularly refers to God’s special choice of a person or an object for a particular purpose. Thus Paul is God’s “chosen/elect vessel” to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Believers have been chosen by God (1 Thess. 1:4), but not on the basis of anything they are or have done (1 Cor. 1:27–28). Election is a central aspect of God’s purpose in redemptive history (Rom. 9:11; 11:28) and is the reason there is a remnant of Jews who believe in Jesus as Messiah despite widespread Jewish rejection of Christ (Rom. 11:5–7). Considered together, God effectually calls those whom he has elected for salvation (Rom. 8:29–30).

Peter states that “if you practice these qualities you will never fall.” While he may be stating a conditional idea, the Greek could also be understood as expressing means. If so, Peter would be saying, “By practicing these qualities you will never fall.” Intentional pursuit of growth in the qualities mentioned in 2 Peter 1:5–7 is how believers ensure that they will never fall. This verb (*ptaiō*) literally means “to lose one’s footing” but came also to mean “to experience disaster.”²⁵ Although this word can refer generally to sin (James 2:10; 3:2), the contrast with entering Christ’s kingdom in 1:11 suggests that falling away from Christ is in view here (cf. Jude 24). By growing in the qualities of 2 Peter 1:5–7, believers will be kept from embracing false teaching that leads to eternal destruction.

It is “in this way”—confirming one’s calling and election through intentional pursuit of the character qualities of 1:5–7—that the believer’s “entrance” into God’s kingdom “will be richly provided.” Entering the kingdom requires a righteousness surpassing that of the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20), and not everyone who calls

21 BDAG, s.v. σπουδάζω (3).

22 BDAG, s.v. βέβαιος (3); cf. the use of this adjective in Hebrews 2:2; 3:14; 6:19; 9:17.

23 TDNT, 1:602.

24 In Greek these two nouns are governed by a single article, which shows that, while distinct, the two are closely related; cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 286–290.

25 BDAG, s.v. πταίω (2).

Jesus “Lord” will enter his kingdom (Matt. 7:21). One must become like a child to enter the kingdom (Matt. 18:3), and this will be especially difficult for those who are wealthy (Matt. 19:23–24). The verb translated “will be provided” (*epichorēgeō*) is the same verb rendered “supplement” in 2 Peter 1:5, signaling that Peter is bringing this section to a close. The passive voice implies that God is the one who provides entrance into the kingdom, while the future tense points to experiencing the full realization of the kingdom at the consummation. Through faith in Christ, believers have already entered the kingdom of God (Col. 1:13–14), yet they await its consummation in a new heavens and earth (2 Pet. 3:13). God will provide this entrance “richly” (*plousiōs*), an adverb that stresses the abundance of the provision. This is no mere “skin of the teeth” entrance! The picture is of “a patron who lavishly celebrates the arrival of a friend or a faithful servant at his home,” or perhaps of “a victor returning to his home city after the Olympic Games and being received with a triumphal welcome.”²⁶

Peter further describes the kingdom in two ways. First, it is “eternal” (cf. Dan. 7:27). This word communicates more than simply an unending period of time; it reflects the Jewish belief that human history is divided into two “ages.” The present evil age is dominated by the powers of sin, death, and the Devil, whereas the age to come (the messianic age) will be a time when all of God’s promises are fulfilled in a new heavens and new earth. The event that will bring about the transition from one age to the next is the day of the Lord, when God will judge his enemies and save his people. But when Christ came, something unexpected happened: through his life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, the age to come has been inaugurated while the present evil age continues. Thus believers live in the overlap between those two ages. By attaching “eternal” to the word “kingdom,” Peter is reminding believers that the promised age to come has already begun but has not yet reached its consummation. Second, it is the kingdom “of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” on which see comment on 2 Peter 1:1–2.

1:12 Verses 12–15 are introduced as a logical conclusion to the truth and importance of the content of verses 3–11. Since God through the gospel has given believers all they need for life and godliness as a means of persevering and entering God’s kingdom, Peter says, “I intend always to remind you of these qualities.” This letter will be how Peter’s apostolic message will be heard long after his death.²⁷ This is necessary because of our tendency as fallen creatures to forget who God is and what he has done for us (1:9).

Peter does not doubt his readers’ knowledge of what he has reminded them of in 1:3–11, noting, “you know them and are established in the truth that you have.” “Established” (*stērizō*) is in the perfect tense, stressing the readers’ condition: to be established is to have a firm foundation, enabling oneself to withstand circumstances without being knocked over (1 Thess. 3:13; 2 Thess. 2:17; 3:3). Believers

²⁶ Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 189.

²⁷ On the topic of 2 Peter as a “testament” offering Peter’s final words of exhortation, see Introduction: Genre and Literary Features.

are established in “the truth that you have,” the truth of the gospel as articulated in 2 Peter 1:3–11.

1:13 Having stated his intention to remind his readers of the truths of 1:3–11, Peter now explains why he does so. He writes, “I think it right, . . . to stir you up by way of reminder.” The verb rendered “think” (*hēgeomai*) communicates a carefully considered decision reached by reflection. Peter uses this same verb (translated “count”) at key points later in the letter. Whereas the false teachers “count it pleasure to revel in the daytime” (2:13), Peter instructs believers to “count the patience of our Lord as salvation” (3:15). To “stir up” (*diegeirō*) is to awaken someone, as Jesus was awoken during the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:39). This verb can also mean to provoke someone to a certain mind-set or action, such as courage in the face of war (2 Macc. 15:10) or martyrdom (2 Macc. 7:21). Like a propeller entering calm water, Peter seeks to stir up his readers to pursue growth in godliness intentionally, through God’s gospel promises. Peter’s “propeller” is his “reminder” (*hypomnēsis*), the noun form of the verb used in 1:12; by this he refers to the entirety of this letter (3:1).

Peter intends to continue reminding believers “as long as I am in this body.” As the ESV footnote indicates, the word for “body” is literally “tent” (*skēnōma*). When the human body is pictured as a tent, the emphasis is usually on its impermanence (Job 4:21; Isa. 38:12; 2 Cor. 5:1–5). Until the day he dies, Peter intends to remind his readers of the truths found in this letter.

1:14 The reason Peter has resolved to remind his readers of the promises of the gospel is that he knows “that the putting off of my body will be soon.” The word translated “putting off” (*apothesis*) pictures taking off clothing and was often used as a metaphor for death.²⁸ It occurs elsewhere only in 1 Peter 3:21, where it refers to the removal of dirt in the discussion on baptism. Just as in the previous verse, Peter refers to his body as a “tent,” stressing its temporary nature. His life is like a tent that is “soon” to be rolled up because it has served its purpose. The force of the word “soon” is on something that is imminent, without specifying a specific amount of time.

Peter’s imminent death will happen just “as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me.” He likely refers to Jesus’ prediction recorded in John 21:18–19. Peter knew all along that following Jesus would eventually cost him his life, and at last he knows his death is imminent.²⁹

1:15 Having already noted his present effort to remind his readers what gospel-grounded growth in godliness looks like (1:12–13), Peter expresses his intent to remind them of this in the future as well. In fact, he “will make every effort” to do so; here he uses the same verb (*spoudazō*) as in 1:10 to describe diligence in confirming one’s calling and election. In reading this letter, his readers will “be able at any time to recall these things”—even, Peter explains, “after my departure [*exodos*].”

²⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 199.

²⁹ See Introduction: Date and Occasion.

By referring to his impending death as an exodus, Peter may be anticipating his account of the transfiguration in 1:16–18.³⁰

Response

Because God has given us everything we need for life and godliness, we need not look elsewhere to find the “key” to the successful Christian life. God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s people are sufficient for us to know God and live in a way that pleases him. Since God’s glory and excellence are the means by which he calls us into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, they should be central to our preaching, teaching, evangelism, and ultimately every aspect of our lives. God calls us to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). As we do so, people will see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

Yet growing spiritually requires intentional effort on our part. We must “make every effort,” using the means God has given us to grow in our knowledge of Christ: his Word, his Spirit, and his people. By growing and persevering in the qualities that reflect God’s own character, we can deepen our confidence that God has called and elected us to enter into Christ’s eternal kingdom.

As we intentionally pursue our spiritual growth, we need constant reminders of gospel truths. Just as the Israelites were prone to forget who God was and what he had done for them, we as believers tend to lose sight of who God is and what he has done for us in Christ. The apostles understood that the long-term health and growth of the church depended in part on reliable written accounts—not only of the acts and words of Jesus (along with their meaning and significance) but also of practical instruction on what following Jesus looks like. Through these written documents, the apostles are able to remind believers of the truth of the gospel and how to live a life pleasing to God in the power of the Spirit. Thus, like Abel, though the apostles have long been dead, they still speak (cf. Heb. 11:4).

2 PETER 1:16–21

¹⁶For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, “This is my beloved Son,¹ with whom I am well pleased,” ¹⁸we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which

³⁰ Luke’s account of the transfiguration uses this noun to portray the death of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promised new exodus (Luke 9:31).

you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

¹ Or *my Son, my (or the) Beloved*

Section Overview

The main body of 2 Peter addresses three interrelated topics. Peter begins by reminding his readers of the foundation of the gospel, which is rooted in the eyewitness testimony of the apostles and the OT Scriptures (1:16–21). Unfortunately, however, false teachers have infiltrated the church, denying Christ through their greedy, sexually immoral lifestyles; however, their judgment is certain (2:1–22). Even though these false teachers deny the return of Christ, believers can be confident that God will fulfill his promise. In the meantime, Christians must pursue lives of holiness and godliness (3:1–13).

Section Outline

- II. Letter Body (1:16–3:13)
 - A. The Foundation of the Gospel (1:16–21)
 - 1. Witnesses of the Transfiguration (1:16–18)
 - 2. The Confirmation of OT Prophecy (1:19–21)

Comment

This initial section of the letter body reminds readers of the foundation of the gospel. Just as the OT required at least two witnesses to establish truth in a judicial setting (Deut. 19:15), Peter affirms the truth of the gospel with the testimony of two witnesses: the eyewitness testimony of the apostles (2 Pet. 1:16–18) and the testimony of the OT Scriptures (1:19–21).

1:16 The main thought of verse 16 is straightforward: “we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” By “we” Peter means the apostles; the content of their preaching was “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The expression “power [*dynamis*] and coming [*parousia*]” likely has the sense of “powerful coming” (cf. Matt. 24:30; Mark 14:62; 2 Thess. 2:9).³¹ Although *parousia* can mean simply “presence” or “arrival” in a general sense, it could also refer in antiquity to the arrival of a deity or the visit of a high-ranking official.³² The NT regularly uses it in connection with the return of Christ (Matt. 24:3; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Pet. 3:4, 12).

As eyewitnesses of Christ's powerful coming, the apostles “did not follow cleverly devised myths.” As used here, “follow” (*exakolouthēō*) means “to accept as

³¹ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 312.

³² BDAG, s.v. παρουσία (2.b).

authoritative determiner of thought or action.”³³ Peter anticipates his discussion of the false teachers, who follow the error of Balaam (2:15) and entice others to follow their sensuality (2:2). Perhaps the false teachers claimed the apostles were following myths when they taught about the return of Christ and God’s judgment. Religion in the Greco-Roman world was rooted in “cleverly devised myths,” and even believers had to be warned about their dangers (1 Tim. 1:4; 4:7; 2 Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14). By calling these false beliefs “cleverly devised,” Peter highlights the ingenuity of those who concocted them.

Instead, the apostles based their preaching on a simple reality: “we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.” While this is the only NT occurrence of the noun rendered “eyewitnesses” (*epoptēs*), the concept is ubiquitous. The apostles are repeatedly described as witnesses in Acts (1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15; 26:16). In Greek literature “majesty” (*megaleiotēs*) often refers to kings, but in the NT it regularly refers to God (Luke 9:43). While the apostles witnessed the majesty of God in many ways, Peter has the transfiguration specifically in view.

1:17 Peter offers an example of Christ’s majesty: the transfiguration. His brief summary suggests that his readers know the story. He introduces the event with the phrase “when he received honor and glory from God the Father.” While similar language is found in Psalm 29:1, Peter likely echoes Psalm 8:5, where David says that God has crowned humanity “with glory and honor.” This same psalm is applied to Jesus in several other NT passages (1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:22; Phil. 3:20–21; Heb. 2:6). As the one who obeys where Adam failed, Jesus displays honor and glory as the rightful King of creation. Thus the heavenly hosts ascribe honor and glory to both God the Father (Rev. 4:11) and the Lamb who was slain (Rev. 5:12).

God the Father expressed this honor and glory when “the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory.” The rare adjective “majestic” (*megaloprepēs*) continues the echo of Psalm 8, which in verse 2 LXX (= English verse 1) uses a cognate noun: “Your majesty [*megaloprepeia*] is above the heavens.” The Father’s voice identifies Jesus as “my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” At least three OT texts are in view. The title “my son” comes from Psalm 2:7, where God says to his anointed king, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.” Whereas both Adam and Israel were sons of God who failed to fulfill his calling on them, God had promised to David a descendant who would be a son of God with an everlasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7; Ps. 2:1–12). But by referring to Jesus as “my beloved” Son, Peter likely alludes to Genesis 22 as well, where God calls Abraham to sacrifice “your beloved son Isaac, whom you love” (Gen. 22:2, 12, 16 LXX). As the one “with whom I am well pleased,” Jesus is also identified as the Isaianic servant: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” (Isa. 42:1). He will be the light of salvation to the nations that Israel never was, by suffering for the sins of his people and rising from the dead to inaugurate the new covenant.

33 BDAG, s.v. ἑξακολουθεῖω (1).

The rightful King, the beloved Son, the suffering servant—these are but three manifestations of Jesus’ honor and glory. The transfiguration is an initial fulfillment of Jesus’ enthronement as King of the world, anticipating the day he will return in glory to consummate his kingdom (Mark 8:31–9:13).

1:18 Peter stresses his firsthand experience of the transfiguration: “we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven.” He is not peddling secondhand accounts of the event. Along with James and John, Peter heard with his own ears the voice of God from heaven proclaiming the Son’s majesty. They “were with him on the holy mountain.” Just as Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, so too these apostles saw the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ on that “holy mountain.” Peter may be echoing Psalm 2:6: “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” Mountains are often places of divine revelation in Scripture. Abraham (Gen. 22:1–14), Moses (Ex. 24:15–31:18), and Elijah (1 Kings 19:1–18) were among those who encountered God on a mountain. Jesus performed or experienced several key events on mountains: prayer (Luke 6:12), teaching (Matt. 5:1), temptation from Satan (Matt. 4:8), transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36), and ascension (Acts 1:10–12).

1:19 The first witness (eyewitness testimony; 2 Pet. 1:16–18) has finished its testimony; now Peter brings forward the second witness: “the prophetic word” (1:19–21). This expression refers to the entire OT, although specific passages may be in view.³⁴ Because the transfiguration fulfilled (at least partially) various elements of the OT hope, this prophetic word is “more fully confirmed.” This same adjective describes the steadfast nature of the hope that anchors our soul (Heb. 6:19). Far from being “cleverly devised myths” (2 Pet. 1:16), the apostles’ eyewitness testimony demonstrates the fulfillment of OT promises.

Therefore, believers would “do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place.” By “pay attention” (*prosechō*), Peter means “to be in a continuous state of readiness to learn of any future danger, need, or error, and to respond appropriately.”³⁵ The need for growth in godliness and the danger of false teaching necessitate careful attention to God’s Word. A metaphor drives the point home: as a “lamp shining in a dark place.” God’s Word is often referred to as light (Pss. 19:8; 119:105, 130), and the gospel is described as light that enables people to see Christ’s glory (2 Cor. 4:4–6). Since believers live in a world of darkness, they must fix their gaze on the light of God’s truth.

This should be the posture of believers “until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” The dawning of the day can be a metaphor for the arrival of God’s eschatological acts (Isa. 9:2; Mal. 4:2; Luke 1:78–79) or simply of comfort in general (Pss. 37:6; 46:5; 130:6). The “morning star” literally refers to the planet Venus, often visible with the rising of the sun. Here it is used symbolically; the imagery is borrowed from Numbers 24:14–19, where Balaam prophesied

³⁴ Philo’s use of similar expressions confirms that the entire OT is in view (e.g., *Legum allegoriae* 3.43; *De plantatione* 1.117; *De sobrietate* 1.68).

³⁵ J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. προσέχω (§27.59).

that in the latter days God would raise up a royal figure to defeat the enemies of God's people and exercise the dominion that Adam did not exercise (Matt. 2:2; Rev. 22:16). As such, this "morning star" corresponds to the echoes of Psalm 8 mentioned in the comment on 2 Peter 1:17. Thus Peter points his readers to fix their hope on the return of Christ, who will defeat all of God's enemies and exercise the full dominion that is rightfully his as the one who obeyed where Adam failed. When Christ returns, believers "will receive and perceive this revelation" in their "hearts."³⁶

1:20 Readers of this letter should pay attention to the prophetic word because they know "first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation." The expression "first of all" (*prōton*) suggests that Peter could give more reasons but instead wants to focus on this one as most significant.³⁷ The expression "prophecy of Scripture" seems to narrow the focus from the entire OT to specific prophetic words or promises, probably the OT texts alluded to in 1:17–19.

In Greek, the expression rendered "comes from someone's own interpretation" can mean either that prophecy cannot be interpreted however the interpreter desires³⁸ or that prophecy does not originate from the interpretation of the prophet. While either makes good sense in the context, the latter seems preferable.³⁹ Parallel expressions in Jewish literature suggest that such language was used to defend the divine origin of OT prophecy.⁴⁰ Thus Peter is countering the opponents' claim that "the prophets may have received visions, but that their prophecies, found in the OT, are only their interpretation of the visions, mere human guesswork."⁴¹

1:21 Peter further explains his claim that prophecy has a divine origin by stating that "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man." The verb rendered "produced" (*pherō*) has the sense of "to bring a thought or idea into circulation."⁴² In 1:17–18 the verb was used to describe God's voice as being "borne from heaven." True biblical prophecy is not something created "by the will of man"; it is a word from God to humanity, mediated through his prophets. Our spiritual birth has its roots in the will of God (John 1:13); the same is true of prophecy.

Peter further elaborates that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."⁴³ When the prophets spoke, their words came "from God." When God called a prophet, he instructed him to speak what the Lord said to him (Jer. 1:7–10, 17; Ezek. 2:7). By contrast, false prophets are not sent by God and merely speak "the deceit of their own minds" (Jer. 14:14). The work of God did not stop with his commissioning of the prophet but continued as the prophets "were carried along by the

³⁶ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 226.

³⁷ BDAG, s.v. πρῶτος (2.b).

³⁸ Schreiner, 1, *2 Peter, Jude*, 322–323.

³⁹ For argumentation, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 229–233; and Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 210–213.

⁴⁰ See Philo, *De vita Mosis* 1.281, 286; *Legum allegoriae* 1.65; 4.49; and Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.121.

⁴¹ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 231.

⁴² BDAG, s.v. φέρω (7).

⁴³ Similar language was common in Hellenistic Judaism for prophetic inspiration; cf. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 233–234.

Holy Spirit.”⁴⁴ Peter uses the participle form of the same verb translated “produced” (*pherō*) in the first clause, but here it has the slightly different sense of “to cause to follow a certain course in direction or conduct.”⁴⁵ Both Josephus (*Antiquities* 4.119) and Philo (*De specialibus legibus* 1.65) use similar language to describe the prophets’ being moved by God to speak his words. In 1 Peter 1:11, Peter refers to the working of “the Spirit of Christ” in the prophets to predict the suffering and glory of Christ. That same Holy Spirit now speaks through the preaching of the gospel (1 Pet. 1:12, 23–25).

Response

While Peter and the apostles were unique in that they saw the majesty of Christ with their physical eyes, as believers today we can see his majesty through God’s Word. It is through the gospel that we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). As we behold that glory, we “are being transformed into the same image” by the work of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). Through the apostolic testimony recorded in the NT, we hear the voice of the same God who spoke on the Mount of Transfiguration.

These verses in 2 Peter are also foundational to our understanding of Scripture. By his Spirit, God inspired men to write down his very words, yet they did so through their distinct personalities and manner of speaking/writing. How gracious of God to reveal himself through his Word so that we can know who he is and how we should relate to him and others!

2 PETER 2:1–22

2 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ²And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

⁴For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell¹ and committed them to chains² of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly;³ ⁷and if he rescued

⁴⁴ In Greek the phrase “by the Holy Spirit” occurs at the beginning of the clause, which may further emphasize the divine nature of prophecy.

⁴⁵ BDAG, s.v. φέρω (3.b). This same language is applied to grass (Job 13:25 LXX), dust (*Wisd. Sol.* 5:14), or chaff (Jer. 13:24) carried by the wind.

righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked⁸ (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard);⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials,⁴ and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment,¹⁰ and especially those who indulge⁵ in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.

Bold and willful, they do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones,¹¹ whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them before the Lord.¹² But these, like irrational animals, creatures of instinct, born to be caught and destroyed, blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant, will also be destroyed in their destruction,¹³ suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their deceptions,⁶ while they feast with you.¹⁴ They have eyes full of adultery,⁷ insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children!¹⁵ Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing,¹⁶ but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

¹⁷ These are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm. For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved.¹⁸ For, speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error.¹⁹ They promise them freedom, but they themselves are slaves⁸ of corruption. For whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.²⁰ For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.²¹ For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.²² What the true proverb says has happened to them: "The dog returns to its own vomit, and the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire."

¹ Greek *Tartarus* ² Some manuscripts *pits* ³ Some manuscripts *an example to those who were to be ungodly*

⁴ Or *temptations* ⁵ Greek *who go after the flesh* ⁶ Some manuscripts *love feasts* ⁷ Or *eyes full of an adulteress*

⁸ For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface

Section Overview

False prophets have been active throughout redemptive history, so it should come as no surprise that in these last days false teachers will arise to lead people astray through their greed and sexual immorality (2 Pet. 2:1–3a). But OT history makes it abundantly clear that God will both judge those who transgress his appointed boundaries and rescue the godly from their trials (2:3b–10a). Thus Peter provides a detailed, scathing, poetic description of the false teachers, concluding that it would have been better for them if they had never known the way of righteousness (2:10b–22).

Section Outline

II.B. The Danger of False Teachers (2:1–22)

1. The Certainty of False Teachers Coming (2:1–3a)
2. The Certain Condemnation of the False Teachers (2:3b–10a)
3. Description of the False Teachers (2:10b–22)

Comment

2:1 Peter now begins to address the problem directly. He starts with a historical analog, reminding his readers that “false prophets also arose among the people.” Throughout Israel’s history, false prophets arose, leading people astray with supposed visions, oracles, and dreams (Jer. 14:13–14). God instructed Israel to distinguish true from false prophets (Deut. 13:1–5; 18:20–22). Because the OT was “written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4), believers should not be surprised that “there will be false teachers among you” (2 Pet. 2:1). Fulfillment of Jesus’ promise on the Mount of Olives had already begun (Matt. 24:11). With the advent of the “latter days,” Satan has intensified his efforts to lead God’s people astray through false prophets and teachers (1 Tim. 4:1–5; 1 John 2:18–27). Designating them as false teachers rather than false prophets may suggest that these individuals did not claim to receive direct revelation from God.

Peter describes the false teachers’ actions in three ways. First, they would “secretly bring in destructive heresies.” The verb translated “secretly bring in” (*pareisagō*) was used in Greek literature to describe the introduction of new doctrines to a preexisting set of beliefs.⁴⁶ The false teachers did not hide what they were teaching but were probably “covering up the degree to which their teaching differs from the accepted apostolic teaching.”⁴⁷ They were introducing “destructive heresies”—teaching contrary to the OT Scriptures and apostolic tradition, thus distorting the gospel and leading to the destruction of teacher and student alike (3:1–13).

Second, the false teachers were “even denying the Master who bought them.” Through his death, Jesus has purchased his people (1 Cor. 6:19–20). Although these false teachers at one time had given the appearance of being slaves of Christ (2 Pet. 2:20–21), they in fact denied him by their false doctrine and immoral lifestyle.⁴⁸ Rather than submit to the one they claim to call Lord, they will hear the Lord say on the last day, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23).

Third, they were “bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” The remainder of the chapter will elaborate on this description, but the point is clear enough: these false teachers were inviting the swift and cataclysmic judgment of eternal destruction that God would render to all who disobey the gospel.

⁴⁶ E.g., Polybius, *Histories* 6.56.12; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.96.5. The related adjective *pareisaktos* occurs in Galatians 2:4.

⁴⁷ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 92.

⁴⁸ Thus Peter speaks phenomenologically. The false teachers appeared to know Christ but did not truly know him; cf. further Thomas R. Schreiner, “‘Problematic Texts’ for Definite Atonement in the Pastoral and General Epistles,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 387–392.

2:2 Peter now turns his attention to those who will embrace the false teachers' message: "many will follow their sensuality." On "follow," see comment on 1:16. Many will follow the false teachers' "sensuality" (*aselgeia*), which refers to "lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable."⁴⁹ In the NT this word regularly appears in vice lists, often with a sexual connotation (Mark 7:22; Rom. 13:13; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; 1 Pet. 4:3). The reference to Lot's distress over the "sensual conduct of the wicked" (2 Pet. 2:7) confirms a sexual connotation here.

Peter further asserts that "because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed." Describing a faithful life as a "way" is common in Scripture (cf. Ps. 1:1–6; Prov. 3:5–6; James 1:8). The particular expression "way of truth" occurs elsewhere in Genesis 24:48 (where God leads Abraham's servant "in the way of truth" [LXX] to the right bride for Isaac) and Psalm 119:30 (where the psalmist asserts, "I have chosen the way of truth" [LXX Ps. 118:30]). This phrase highlights the contrast between the true gospel and the message of the false teachers.

Thus it is the gospel itself that "will be blasphemed" by the false teachers. Peter may be echoing Isaiah 52:5 (LXX), in which the prophet laments that God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles. Paul quotes this same verse in Romans 2:24 to argue that the sinful disobedience of the Jews has brought about a similar blaspheming of God's name. Here it is the sinful lives of the false teachers leading people to dismiss the way of truth as just another path to self-indulgence.

2:3a False teachers will also "exploit" many. Although "exploit" (*emporeuomai*) has a neutral meaning of "to engage with someone in a business transaction,"⁵⁰ the context indicates a negative sense of the word. It is because of "their greed" that they exploit people, referring to both their motivation and their condition. They use "false words" to exploit. Rather than adhering to the truth of the gospel, the false teachers use false words to preach a false message (Eph. 5:6; 1 Thess. 2:5).

2:3b These false teachers will not escape punishment for their misdeeds; instead, Peter promises, "their condemnation from long ago is not idle." "Condemnation" refers to God's judgment of eternal damnation on these false teachers who claim to be believers but in fact are not. God decreed this condemnation "long ago," but the delay should not be misinterpreted to indicate that their condemnation is "idle." To amplify this point, Peter adds that "their destruction is not asleep." As the protector of his people, God does not "slumber nor sleep" (Ps. 121:4). The destructive heresies the false teachers propagate lead to their own eternal destruction, just as the present heavens and earth are preserved for "the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly" (2 Pet. 3:7). God's delay in bringing final judgment leads some to scoff (3:1–10), concluding that perhaps such judgment is so "asleep" as to never awaken. Rest assured, Peter asserts, that is not the case.

⁴⁹ BDAG, s.v. ἀσελγεία.

⁵⁰ BDAG, s.v. ἐμπορεύομαι (2); cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.134; Philo, *Legum allegoriae* 1.204.

2:4 Verses 4–10a are one long sentence in Greek, structured as an “if/then” statement with several “if’s” leading to a two-part “then.” This complex sentence draws on three OT examples to support Peter’s claim that the false teachers will not escape eternal condemnation. The first example comes from Genesis 6:1–4: Peter states that “God did not spare angels when they sinned.” Rather than spare them, God “cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment.” According to Genesis 6:1–4, the nature of the angels’ sin was marrying human women they found attractive and producing offspring with them. Despite never being mentioned again in the OT, this event is mentioned and explained in a number of non-inspired Jewish texts.⁵¹ That Peter says God “cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness” suggests he is drawing on *1 Enoch* 6–21.⁵² According to this tradition, these angels taught their human wives all kinds of secrets/mysteries relating to magic, medicine, plants, etc., in addition to engaging in sexual immorality. Peter may have chosen this particular OT example (understood against the backdrop of Jewish traditions) because these fallen angels engaged in unnatural sexual immorality and were supposed to exercise a teaching ministry for the benefit of humanity that instead led to their condemnation. So, too, the false teachers of Peter’s day use “false words” and “sensual passions of the flesh” to exploit and ensnare people (2 Pet. 2:3, 18).

Regardless of the particulars, the main point of the illustration is clear enough: God did not spare angelic beings who corrupted those under their charge but instead sentenced them to eternal condemnation. God’s delay in executing final justice should not be mistaken for apathy; it is instead a sign of his great mercy in granting time for repentance (3:8–9; Rom. 2:4). On the last day, God will leave no account unsettled or outstanding.

2:5 Peter’s second example is the next event in Genesis: the flood. Unlike the previous example, however, this example includes two components: judgment and deliverance. This twofold focus corresponds to the main point of this section stated in 2:9: God knows how to judge the wicked and rescue the godly. First is the element of judgment: God “did not spare the ancient world . . . when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly.” Peter repeats “spare” (*pheidomai*) from the previous verse, linking the two examples together, as they are in Genesis 6. After a description of the sin of the “sons of God” in Genesis 6:1–4, the following verses recount God’s sorrow at the rampant and pervasive wickedness on the earth and his decision to “de-create” the world through the flood (Gen. 6:5–7). The flood as an act of God’s judgment became paradigmatic, as later biblical writers used flood imagery to portray God’s punishment of sin (Isa. 28:1–2; 30:27–31; Jer. 47:2–4), including Peter later in this letter (2 Pet. 3:5–7). “Ungodly” (*asebēs*) refers to those who do not orient their lives toward God.

⁵¹ *Jubilees* 4:15–5:9; *Testament of Reuben* 5:6–7; *Testament of Naphtali* 3:5.

⁵² The word Peter uses for “cast to hell” is *tartarōō*, which literally means “to hold captive in Tartarus” (BDAG, s.v. τάρταρος). According to Greek mythology, “Tartarus was the subterranean abyss to which the disobedient gods and rebellious human beings were consigned” (Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 103.).

Next is the element of rescue: “[God] preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others.” Because Noah found favor in God’s eyes, he was “a righteous man, blameless in his generation” (Gen. 6:8–9). He was “a herald” (*kēryx*), “an official entrusted with a proclamation”;⁵³ the early Christians used this word for those who preached the gospel (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). Noah preached “righteousness” (*dikaïosynē*). Peter has already linked our standing before God through the gospel to “the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:1) and later in this chapter will refer to the gospel as the “way of righteousness” (2:21). According to 3:13, the new heavens and earth will be a place where “righteousness dwells.” Peter links the message of Noah to the gospel the apostles preach. Just as Noah proclaimed the righteousness of God and called the wicked to repent of their sins, so too heralds of the gospel announce the way of righteousness that calls sinners to trust in Christ.

Noah was not the only one saved; there were “seven others” with him.⁵⁴ Noah’s wife, along with their three sons and their wives, joined him in the ark (Gen. 6:18). In a sense, then, Noah is portrayed as a faithful teacher of the gospel, in contrast to the false teachers Peter is repudiating. Noah faithfully communicated the truth of what God revealed to him and led his family to take refuge from God’s judgment. That is what a true teacher of the gospel is called to do: proclaim God’s judgment against sin and call people to take refuge in Jesus Christ from God’s righteous wrath.

2:6 Peter now turns to his third OT example (2:6–8), and like the previous one it contains the contrasting elements of judgment (v. 6) and salvation (vv. 7–8). Again Peter begins with judgment: “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction.” The wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah was so great that God destroyed them (Gen. 18:1–19:29; cf. Jer. 23:14; Ezek. 16:44–58). Peter describes their fate as “extinction” (*katastrophē*), a word referring to a “condition of total destruction, with the implication that nothing is in its customary place or position.”⁵⁵

In doing this, God was “making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” God’s purpose in destroying these two cities was not confined to judging their sin; he also purposed this event to serve as a warning of the greater final judgment awaiting the ungodly on the last day. Like the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah became a recurring picture of judgment in Scripture (Deut. 29:23; Isa. 13:19; Jer. 49:18; 50:40; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9) and functions as a type of the sudden judgment that will come at Christ’s return (Luke 17:29).⁵⁶

⁵³ BDAG, s.v. κήρυξ (1).

⁵⁴ Woodenly the Greek reads, “Noah the eighth.” Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 250) suggests there may be symbolism here, since eight “represented an eighth day of new creation, following the seven days of the old creation’s history.”

⁵⁵ BDAG, s.v. καταστροφή (1).

⁵⁶ The same is true in Jewish literature as well: 3 *Macc.* 2:5; *Sir.* 16:8; *Testament of Levi* 14:6; *Testament of Naphthali* 3:4; *Jubilees* 16:5–6; 2 *Enoch* 10:4; *Wisd. Sol.* 10:7; cf. D. A. Carson, “Jude,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1072–1074.

2:7 With the judgment laid out in verse 6, Peter moves to salvation in verse 7, stating that God “rescued righteous Lot.” Lot was Abraham’s nephew (Gen. 11:27) who settled near Sodom because of the superior quality of the land (Gen. 13:10–13). Lot welcomed angelic visitors into his home, and when confronted by the men of the city he offered to send out his virgin daughters for the crowd to do with as they pleased rather than sending out the visitors (Gen. 19:1–11). These two angelic visitors led Lot safely out of the city, although his wife was turned into a pillar of salt when she looked back at Sodom (Gen. 19:12–22). Lot settled in the city of Zoar (Gen. 19:23–29). Based on what Scripture tells us about Lot, Peter’s calling him “righteous” may seem surprising. Although some Jewish writers criticized Lot (Philo, *De ebrietate* 1.164), others agree with Peter’s assessment; *Wisdom of Solomon* 10:6 states that wisdom “rescued a righteous man when the ungodly were perishing; he escaped the fire that descended on the Five Cities.”⁵⁷ Despite Lot’s clear flaws, Abraham considered him righteous (Gen. 18:22–33), and Lot did obey the angels in fleeing the city.

The remainder of this verse further explains Lot’s “righteousness”: he was “greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked.” The verb rendered “greatly distressed” (*kataponeō*) means “to cause distress through oppressive means.”⁵⁸ In Jewish literature the term often referred to the plight of Jewish people as oppressed by foreign powers (3 *Macc.* 2:2, 13; Josephus, *Antiquities* 7.124; 17.252). This distress was caused “by the sensual conduct of the wicked”; woodenly this phrase reads, “by the conduct of lawless ones in sensuality.” “Conduct” (*anastrophē*) refers to the totality of a person’s life, what we today might call “lifestyle.” Peter uses this word frequently to describe how a person lives: “Keep your conduct [“lifestyle”] among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12). He asks his readers to consider “what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness” in light of our hope for a new heaven and new earth (2 Pet. 3:11). Like the false teachers Peter is countering (2:2), the wicked in Lot’s day were characterized by “sensuality,” a word emphasizing their lack of self-restraint, especially manifested in sexual immorality (2:7).

2:8 Peter further explains Lot’s distress, noting that he “was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard.” The verb rendered “tormenting” (*basanizō*) appears several times in the Gospels in the context of either physical illness (Matt. 8:6) or demons’ asking Jesus not to punish them (Matt. 8:29; Luke. 8:28). In Jewish literature the word tended to refer to either the righteous’ suffering at the hands of the wicked (2 *Macc.* 7:13) or the punishment awaiting the wicked (2 *Macc.* 7:17; *Wisd. Sol.* 12:23). The imperfect tense of the verb here portrays the torment of “his righteous soul” as continual, caused by “their lawless deeds that he saw and heard.” The persistent wickedness of the city tormented Lot as he

⁵⁷ *The English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁵⁸ BDAG, s.v. καταπονέω.

“lived among them day after day.” The rare verb translated “live” (*enkatoikeō*) has the more specific sense of “live as a resident.”⁵⁹ As Lot interacted “day after day” with his neighbors, their wickedness constantly tormented him.

2:9 After a lengthy series of “if” clauses (2:4–8), Peter at last arrives at the subsequent “then.” Two things follow from the statements of 2:4–8. First, “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials.” By using the verb “rescue” (*rhyomai*), Peter makes a direct link to God’s rescue of Lot mentioned in 2:7. This rescue is for the “godly” (*eusebēs*), those whose lives are oriented toward God through a right relationship with him through Jesus Christ (cf. 1:3, 6–7; 2:5–6). The godly are rescued “from trials” (*peirasmos*), which refers to “an attempt to make one do something wrong.”⁶⁰ Jesus instructed his disciples to pray, “lead us not into temptation [*peirasmon*]” (Matt. 6:13). First Peter 1:6–7 indicates that its readers “now for a little while, . . . have been grieved by various trials” to test the genuineness of their faith. So they should “not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you” (1 Pet. 4:12). As believers experience the trials of resisting false teachers and dealing with the fallout from their false doctrine, they can move forward in the confidence that God will see them through.

Second, the Lord knows how “to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment.” In contrast to Noah, the herald of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:5), and righteous Lot (vv. 7–8), the false teachers are “unrighteous” (*adikos*). Just as the angels who sinned are being “kept until the judgment” (v. 4), so too the unrighteous are being kept by God “under punishment” (*kolazō*), a rare word that has the sense of cutting off.⁶¹ In both Greek and Jewish literature it often referred to God’s punishment of the wicked (1 Esd. 8:24; 2 Macc. 6:14; 4 Macc. 18:5). Those who reject God and the gospel of Jesus Christ are being kept for the day of judgment; as John puts it, “the wrath of God remains” on them (John 3:36).

2:10a Among those destined for condemnation, Peter highlights two of their sins.⁶² First, the unrighteous are “those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion.”⁶³ Although the language here is broad, encompassing a wide range of sinful passions violating God’s norms, the primary emphasis is likely on sexual sin. The word rendered “defiling” (*miasmos*) often has a specifically sexual connotation (*Testament of Benjamin* 8:2; *Wisd. Sol.* 14:26). By continually indulging in lustful defiling passions, the condemned demonstrate they have not in fact “escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Pet. 1:4).

Second, the unrighteous “despise authority.” While this specific word for “authority” (*kyriotēs*) can refer elsewhere in the NT to angelic beings (Eph. 1:21; Col.

⁵⁹ BDAG, s.v. ἐγκατοικέω.

⁶⁰ BDAG, s.v. πειρασμός (2).

⁶¹ MM, 352.

⁶² In Greek, Peter joins the two together with a single article, indicating he has the same people in view; cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 283.

⁶³ The phrase “those who indulge” is woodenly “those who go after,” which picks up OT language of going after other gods (Deut. 4:3; 6:14); cf. Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 233.

1:16), here it refers to the specific authority of the Lord Jesus himself. Peter chose this rare word to create a wordplay between authority (*kyriotēs*) and the Lord (*kyrios*) Jesus Christ. As those who deny “the Master who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1), the false teachers do not merely reject authority; they “despise” it. This verb (*kataphroneō*) has the sense of actively showing contempt toward something as having little or no value.⁶⁴ Paul uses this same word to describe someone who despises God’s patience in not bringing immediate judgment for sin (Rom. 2:4).

2:10b Peter begins his blistering description of the false teachers by calling them “bold and willful.” While boldness in preaching the gospel is good (Phil. 1:14), here it has the sense of an audacious and presumptuous arrogance. They are “willful” (*authadēs*), stubbornly asserting their own agenda and following their own impulses instead of submitting to God’s will.⁶⁵ Thus they are the opposite of godly overseers, who “must not be arrogant [*authadēs*]” (Titus 1:7). Furthermore, these false teachers “do not tremble as they blaspheme the glorious ones.” When confronted with the divine, whether God himself or one of his heavenly messengers, a common human response is to “tremble” (Matt. 28:4; Acts 7:32). Yet these false teachers do not do so, even as they slander “the glorious ones,” which most likely refers to evil spiritual beings.⁶⁶ Peter does not indicate just how the false teachers slandered these evil spiritual beings; perhaps they “were mocking the possibility that their sins might put them at the mercy of such evil spiritual beings.”⁶⁷

2:11 In contrast to the audacious false teachers, the “angels, though greater in might and power, do not pronounce a blasphemous judgment against them.” Peter generalizes the point made in Jude 9 by arguing, in essence, that “Good angels do not venture to announce judgment over evil angels. They leave such judgment to the Lord.”⁶⁸ Depending on the textual variant, the angels’ reluctance to judge takes place either “before the Lord” or “from the Lord.” The former focuses on the angels’ service in God’s presence, while the latter recognizes the Lord’s use of angels to reveal his judgments.

2:12 Peter resumes his scathing description of the false teachers: “these, . . . will also be destroyed in their destruction.” By using “also,” Peter links the destruction of these particular false teachers to the general principle of God’s punishing the unrighteous (2 Pet. 2:9). The ESV captures well the wordplay in Greek between “will be destroyed” (*phtheirō*) and “destruction” (*phthora*). This word family occurs regularly in the LXX, where it can refer to something corrupt (Gen. 6:11) or destructive (1 Chron. 20:1; Jer. 13:9). Peter may echo Isaiah 24:3, which, in describing cosmic judgment, notes, “The earth shall be destroyed with destruction.”⁶⁹ If

⁶⁴ BDAG, s.v. καταφρονέω (1); MM, 334.

⁶⁵ TDNT, 1:509.

⁶⁶ This seems to make the best sense of the contrast between the “glorious ones” here and the “angels” in the next verse; cf. Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 261–262). For the view that the glorious ones are good angels who do not slander the false teachers, see Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 235–236.

⁶⁷ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 123.

⁶⁸ Schreiner, 1, *2 Peter, Jude*, 348.

⁶⁹ LXX, AT.

so, Peter is placing the destruction of the false teachers within the larger context of God's cataclysmic judgment on creation itself (2 Pet. 3:1–13). The Greek is unclear as to whether Peter means the false teachers will be destroyed with ("also") the "irrational animals" or with the "glorious ones" (i.e., evil spiritual beings; cf. comment on 2:10b); either way, the destruction of the false teachers is certain.

Peter gives four further descriptions of the false teachers. First, they are "like irrational animals." The false teachers' wickedness is such that they act in a subhuman fashion; their humanity is obscured by behavior befitting animals incapable of relating to God. Second, they are "creatures of instinct." Instead of being directed by the Holy Spirit and pursuing qualities characterizing growth in godliness, they are controlled by their instinctive impulses, like animals. Third, they are "born to be caught and destroyed." Although these false teachers give the appearance of being free and of avoiding the consequences for their wickedness, they are in fact like animals who are caught for food and thus destroyed. No matter how hard they run, they will not outpace God's righteous judgment. Fourth, the false teachers are "blaspheming about matters of which they are ignorant." While they no doubt present themselves as experts on what they teach, Peter asserts that their slanderous words are rooted in ignorance. He may specifically have in mind their audacity in reviling "the glorious ones" (2:10).

2:13 The opening clause of this verse further explains the false teachers' destruction. They are "suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing." The verb rendered "suffering wrong" (*adikeō*) comes from the same word family used seven times in this section to contrast the righteous (2:5, 7, 8, 21) with the unrighteous false teachers (2:9, 13, 15) and is reinforced by the word "wrongdoing" (*adikia*). This word family also stresses the judicial nature of the suffering; they are experiencing God's just condemnation of their sin. This is the "wage" they have earned for their wickedness.

Peter shifts from their fate back to their immorality: "They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime." The word for "pleasure" (*hēdonē*) always has a sinful connotation in the NT (Luke 8:14; Titus 3:3; James 4:1–3); it "represents one of the many forces which belong to the world of unsanctified carnality, which strive against the work of God and His Spirit and which drag man back again into the kingdom of evil."⁷⁰ These false teachers pursue pleasure as they "revel in the daytime." To revel (*tryphē*) is to engage "in a fast, self-indulgent lifestyle."⁷¹ They are so brazen in their reveling that they do it in broad daylight.

Peter continues: "They are blots and blemishes." Whereas Christ died to present the church "without spot [*spilon*]" (Eph. 5:27), these false teachers are "blots" (*spiloi*) on the purity of the church. Under the old covenant, "blemishes" (*mōmos*) disqualified a person from offering sacrifice (Lev. 21:17–23) or an animal from being used for sacrifice (Lev. 22:20–25); likewise, the false teachers are blemishes, making them unfit to lead God's people. These false teachers are "reveling in their

⁷⁰ TDNT, 2:909.

⁷¹ BDAG, s.v. τρυφή (1).

deceptions,” finding joy in the lies they propagate to lead people astray. The false teachers are even so brazen as to do this “while they feast with you.” In the early church, believers gathered regularly to share a meal (Acts 2:42–47), and in the context of this larger meal often celebrated the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34). The revelry of the false teachers intruded into even the most sacred of celebrations, turning a meal intended to remember the Lord Jesus Christ and anticipate his return into an occasion for immorality and deception.

2:14 Peter provides five more descriptions of the false teachers. (1) “They have eyes full of adultery.” Again Peter highlights the sexual immorality of the false teachers, perhaps echoing Jesus’ teaching (Matt. 5:27–30). They are constantly looking for someone to seduce or take advantage of.⁷² As such they are (2) “insatiable for sin.” The rare Greek word rendered “insatiable” (*akatapaustos*) highlights the incessant appetite for sin⁷³ and probably in this case sexual immorality that cannot be satisfied. Perhaps the false teachers sought to turn their love feasts into a Greco-Roman banquet, where, in addition to food and sacrifices offered to various deities, immoral entertainment (sometimes sexual in nature) was common.⁷⁴

As if their own sin were not bad enough, (3) “they entice unsteady souls.” James 1:14 uses this same verb to describe temptation. Like skilled fishermen, the false teachers use bait to lure into sin those who are not established in sound doctrine (2 Pet. 2:18). (4) “They have hearts trained in greed.” Like athletes who train for competition, the false teachers have “trained” (*gymnazō*) their hearts in the pursuit of greed. Unlike Paul, who trained himself in godliness to preach the gospel faithfully (1 Cor. 9:24–26; 1 Tim. 4:7), these false teachers have focused their energies on the accumulation of wealth. Rather than guarding their hearts (Prov. 4:23), they ignore or disregard Jesus’ stern warnings that “you cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13) and that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Finally, they are (5) “accursed children.” Instead of being obedient children (1 Pet. 1:14), they stand under divine condemnation (Isa. 57:4; Eph. 2:3).

2:15–16 Far from adhering to the gospel, the false teachers are “forsaking the right way.” The decision to depart from the gospel was an intentional and willful one. In the OT, “right way” refers to believing what God calls his people to believe and living as God calls them to live (Ps. 1:1–6; Isa. 33:15; 40:3). By turning away from the true path of the gospel, these false teachers “have gone astray.” Whereas all of us “were straying like sheep,” genuine believers “have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25); by contrast, these false teachers are “denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1).

The combination of sexual immorality and greed reveals that the false teachers “have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor.” Numbers 22–24 records how

⁷² Peter may echo “a well-known rhetorical tag according to which the shameless man does not have κόρος (“pupils” or “maidens”—a pun) in his eyes, but πόρνους (“harlots”: Plutarch, *Moralia* 528E)” (Bauckham, *Jude*, 2 Peter, 266).

⁷³ LSJ, s.v. ἀκατάπαυστος.

⁷⁴ See Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 280–282.

Balak, king of Moab, attempted to hire Balaam to pronounce curses on Israel. After initially refusing, Balaam accepted Balak's money and agreed to curse Israel. But instead of pronouncing curses, Balaam delivered four oracles blessing Israel and foretelling the Messiah. Having failed to curse Israel, Balaam suggested that the Moabites entice Israel away from Yahweh through sexual immorality and idolatry (Num. 31:16). Balaam became an example of those who try to put stumbling blocks in front of God's people (Deut. 23:5–6; Josh. 13:22; 24:9; Neh. 13:2; Mic. 6:5; Jude 11; Rev. 2:14). Peter focuses on Balaam's greed when he elaborates that he "loved gain from wrongdoing." Jewish literature emphasized Balaam's prevarication, greed, and sexual immorality.⁷⁵ Some in the church at Pergamum "[held to] the teaching of Balaam," putting stumbling blocks before God's people, such as food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality (Rev. 2:14). Like Balaam, the false teachers propagated their lies and sexual immorality to line their pockets (2 Pet. 2:3, 14).

On his way to meet with Balak, Balaam "was rebuked for his own transgression." Balaam's "transgression" was his willingness to accept Balak's money in exchange for cursing Israel. As a result, "a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness." The angel of the Lord stood in front of Balaam's donkey, causing it to turn aside from the path (Num. 22:22–35). In anger, Balaam struck the donkey, and in response the donkey spoke! Only then did God open Balaam's eyes to see the angel of the Lord, who warned Balaam to speak only what God put into his mouth. Even this "irrational animal" (cf. 2 Pet. 2:12) had more insight and fear of the Lord than the alleged prophet! But this is what it took for God to "[restrain] the prophet's madness." The madness in view may be Balaam's willingness to claim to speak for God when in reality he was not, or the folly of trying to curse those whom God had promised to bless (cf. Gen. 12:1–3).

2:17 Peter resumes his rapid-fire description of the false teachers. They are "waterless springs and mists driven by a storm." "Springs" (*pēgai*) are an image of the eschatological salvation promised by the prophets (Isa. 35:7; 41:18; 49:10). When God condemns the idolatry of Judah, he declares, "They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters" (Jer. 2:13). Rather than being sources of the life-giving waters of the gospel, the false teachers are waterless springs. "Mists" (*homichlai*) were often associated with darkness or hidden things (Isa. 29:18; Amos 4:13; Joel 2:2; Zeph. 1:15), which fits the imagery here of being "driven by a storm." This same word for "storm" (*lailaps*) occurs in Job 38:1 (LXX), where the Lord appears to Job in the midst of a whirlwind. Instead of being rooted in the gospel, the false teachers are blown around with every wind of false doctrine. For these false teachers, "the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved." Peter repeats language from 2 Peter 2:4 to highlight the hopelessness of their eternal state.

2:18 This verse provides the reason why "the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved" for the false teachers: "They entice . . . those who are barely escaping from

⁷⁵ Carson, "Jude," 1076.

those who live in error.” On “entice,” see comment on 2:14. The false teachers are pictured as fishermen trying to lure those who have not yet succumbed to their wiles but are in imminent danger of doing so. Whereas believers have “escaped the corruption that is in the world” (1:4), the targets of the false teachers “are barely escaping” the false teachers who live in error. The verb “live” (*anastrephō*) means “to conduct oneself in terms of certain principles.”⁷⁶ This same verb occurs in 1 Peter 1:17, where Peter calls believers to “conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.” Instead of obeying this command, however, the false teachers are living in the realm of “error.”

The false teachers entice the vulnerable in two ways. First, they entice by “speaking loud boasts of folly.” Peter may be echoing Daniel 11:36, where a prophesied king will “exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods.” Through these false teachers, Satan is preparing the web of lies and deceit that he will use to deceive the world. Despite their bravado, the boasts of the false teachers are nothing but “folly” (*mataiotēs*), a word highlighting the emptiness of life apart from God (Eccles. 1:2).

Second, the false teachers entice “by sensual passions of the flesh.” Sinful passion is personified as working in the world to produce corruption (2 Pet. 1:4) and is a defining characteristic of the false teachers (2:10). Peter appears to have sexual passions in view here, evidenced by the use of the word “sensual” (*aselgeia*). The very sensuality that ensnared the false teachers (2:2) and Lot’s neighbors (2:7) has become the bait by which the false teachers lure the vulnerable into their web of deceit.

2:19 To lure the vulnerable, the false teachers “promise them freedom.” In 1 Peter 2:16 the apostle exhorted his readers to “live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.” In contrast, the freedom the false teachers promise is likely freedom from final judgment and moral restraints (2 Pet. 2:14).⁷⁷ Peter notes the irony that those who peddle the promise of freedom are in fact “slaves of corruption [*phthora*].” This is the same word translated “destruction” in 2:12, where it referred to the fate of the false teachers. Corruption has such a grip on these false teachers that it owns them.

This observation proves a general principle: “Whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved.” The verb “overcomes” (*hēttaomai*) occurs in Isaiah (LXX) and in Josephus to describe military conquest. Sin and corruption are pictured as powers that conquer a person. Such a person is “enslaved” (*douloō*); corruption has gained complete mastery over him. These verbs are both in the perfect tense, stressing that this is the state/condition of the person described. Slavery to sin takes many forms, but in the end the result is the same: death (Rom. 6:20–23). Only the gospel can deliver from its grip (Rom. 6:17–18).

2:20 Peter now further explains his proverbial statement concerning slavery in the previous verse with an “if . . . then” statement. The basic condition is “if they

⁷⁶ BDAG, s.v. ἀναστρέφω (3.b).

⁷⁷ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 359.

are overcome.” The circumstances of their being overcome are indicated by two participles. The first provides the time frame: “after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” The word for “defilement” (*miasma*) is closely related to the word translated “defiling” (*miasmos*) in 2:10, which described the passion of the false teachers who were under God’s righteous condemnation. This escape came “through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” By using language similar to 1:2–11, Peter indicates these people have professed faith in Christ at some point but have since proved their profession to be false. The second participle explains why they have been overcome: “they are again entangled in” the defilements of the world. Unlike the good soldier who avoids entanglement with worldly affairs (2 Tim. 2:4), the false teachers are “entangled” (*emplekō*) in the same kind of sin that characterized their life before professing Christ.

As a result, “the last state has become worse for them than the first.” Those who have professed faith in Christ but then returned unrepentantly to their sinful ways are in a worse state than before their profession (Heb. 6:4–8). Peter likely echoes Jesus’ own teaching in Matthew 12:43–45, where he describes a man who, after having a demon cast out of him, ends up with seven evil spirits worse than the first; as a result, “The last state of that person is worse than the first” (Matt. 12:45).

2:21 Peter reinforces the point of 2:20. He begins by restating his claim from the previous verse: “It would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness.” The expression “way of righteousness” refers to the true gospel of Jesus Christ and its entailments for a life of obedience to God (Job 24:12–13; Matt. 21:32), which the false teachers knew but did not follow. Because of them, “the way of truth will be blasphemed” (2 Pet. 2:2), and in their greed they have instead “followed the way of Balaam” (2:15). On “righteousness,” see comment on 2:5.

“After knowing” the way of righteousness, these individuals “turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.” Jesus had warned that “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62), but that is exactly what these people have done. Knowledge is not enough. “Holy commandment” is another way of speaking of instruction in how to live the Christian life that flows from the gospel. Peter likely uses the singular term “commandment” to emphasize the totality of the body of Christian instruction rather than a specific command (cf. 2 Pet. 3:2). This commandment was “delivered” to them, a verb (*paradidōmi*) highlighting the passing on of the apostolic message (Jude 3).

Peter’s larger theological point is that God’s judgment on people such as these will be more severe than the judgment on those who never made any profession of faith in Christ. That does not mean that ignorance will excuse anyone’s sin. But those who claim to believe the gospel but then return to a habitual pattern of unrepentant sin in their rejection of Jesus will be far worse off on judgment day.

2:22 Peter concludes with two proverbs illustrating how the false teachers are like irrational animals. The first (“The dog returns to its own vomit”) is likely drawn from Proverbs 26:11: “Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” In the ancient world, dogs were rarely pets; they were instead scavengers or perhaps on occasion used in herding or guarding. As such, comparing someone to a dog was never positive (1 Sam. 17:43; 2 Sam. 16:9; Phil. 3:2).

The second proverb compares the false teachers to pigs: “the sow, after washing herself, returns to wallow in the mire.” Although there does not appear to be a specific OT precursor to this expression, there are parallels in both Jewish and Greco-Roman sources.⁷⁸ Jews were known for their refusal to eat pork (Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8), something many pagans could not understand. But even among pagans, pigs were considered dirty animals, well known for their propensity to enjoy wallowing in mud even after being washed. By returning to their sinful pre-conversion lifestyle, these false teachers are like recently washed pigs wallowing in the mud.

Peter may also be echoing the teaching of Jesus, who said, “Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you” (Matt. 7:6). It was common for Jews to regard Gentiles as dogs and pigs; Peter takes these terms and applies them to the false teachers, on the basis not of ethnicity but of how they live.

Response

The presence of false teachers in the church today should not surprise us. Jesus himself warned that the last days would be characterized by the presence of false prophets and teachers (Matt. 24:9–12). They usually introduce their destructive heresies subtly, twisting the truths of God’s Word. The best antidote against false teaching is a continually growing understanding of the true gospel.

False teachers often gain traction in the church by appealing to people’s sinful desires and inclinations. The most common characteristics of false teachers in the NT are greed, sexual immorality, and rejection of authority. By engaging in these deviant behaviors and teachings, these false teachers not only deny the authority of Christ; they also bring destruction upon themselves and all who follow in their ways. This is why a primary responsibility of elders is “to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

As believers, our comfort in the face of false teachers is in knowing that “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment” (2 Pet. 2:9). When false teachers prosper, we might begin to question whether they will ever be held accountable for their actions. We must remember God’s commitment to bring judgment on those who lead people astray and to preserve his people in the midst of trials.

⁷⁸ See Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 279–280.

2 PETER 3:1–13

3 This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, ²that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, ³knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires. ⁴They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” ⁵For they deliberately overlook this fact, that the heavens existed long ago, and the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God, ⁶and that by means of these the world that then existed was deluged with water and perished. ⁷But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.

⁸But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you,¹ not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies² will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.³

¹¹Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹²waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn!

¹³But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

¹ Some manuscripts *on your account* ² Or *elements*; also verse 12 ³ Greek *found*; some manuscripts *will be burned up*

Section Overview

Peter turns his attention to the content of the false teaching and the appropriate way for believers to respond. This section breaks down into three units. First, Peter highlights the central tenet of the false message—denying the return of Christ (2 Pet. 3:1–7). The apostles had predicted that such false teachers would come (3:1–4). The error of the false teachers stems from their deliberately overlooking the fact that God not only created the heavens and the earth through his word but also is storing them up for fire on the last day (3:5–7). In the second unit (3:8–10), Peter asserts that God’s apparent slowness is in fact a display of his patience,

providing time for people to repent before he comes like a thief in the night. In the final unit (3:11–13), Peter exhorts believers to pursue lives of holiness and godliness as they await the arrival of a new heavens and earth.

Section Outline

II.C. The Promise of Christ's Return (3:1–13)

1. False Teachers Deny the Return of Christ (3:1–7)
2. The Certainty of Christ's Return (3:8–10)
3. Response: Pursue Holiness in Anticipation of Christ's Return (3:11–13)

3:1 When Peter says “this is now the second letter that I am writing to you,” he may be referring to 1 Peter, but we cannot be sure.⁷⁹ His recipients are “beloved” because they are objects of God’s special covenantal love. As stated in 1:13, Peter writes as a means of “stirring up your sincere mind.” He is not necessarily implying that his recipients are ignorant of the danger the false teachers present. He affirms they have a “sincere mind”; unlike the false teachers, they do not have hidden motives or agendas. The means of stirring up their sincere mind is “by way of reminder.” By again repeating language from 1:13–20, Peter hints that the contents of the letter, though not new, must be remembered if his audience is to persevere in faith and resist the pressures of the world and its false teachers.

3:2 Peter’s reminder has two parts. First, his readers must remember “the predictions of the holy prophets.” The perfect tense of this phrase highlights the abiding status of these previously spoken words; the prophets continue to speak today. Peter’s use throughout the letter of portions of all three major divisions of the OT (Torah, Prophets, and Writings) suggests he has the entirety of the OT in view and not merely what we commonly refer to as the prophetic books. As Peter has previously written, the OT prophets were serving believers in proclaiming the good news preached to them (1 Pet. 1:10–12, 22–25).

Second, those who read Peter’s letter must remember “the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles.” Rather than a specific commandment of ethical instruction, Peter has in view the gospel message that commands people to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ (John 6:29; Acts 2:38). As the sovereign “Lord,” Jesus has the authority to command that people believe in him and obey everything he taught (Matt. 28:18–20). As the loving “Savior” of his people, Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (Titus 2:14). We obey this commandment to repent and believe by following the “way of righteousness” that he has set before us (2 Pet. 2:21). Peter’s readers received this commandment “through your apostles,” whom Jesus promised to enable to remember and communicate faithfully his actions and their significance

⁷⁹ See discussion in Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 368–370.

(John 14:26). As believers today, we have that message faithfully passed on to us in the NT.

Because the apostolic testimony and the OT are the foundation of the gospel (2 Pet. 1:16–21), Peter calls believers to remember them as the authoritative basis for the doctrine and practice of the church and the key to resisting the advances of the false teachers.

3:3 Peter signals the importance of what he is about to say by introducing it with “first of all.” Remembering the OT and the apostolic message will enable his readers to know that “scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing.” A “scoffer” (*empaiktēs*) is “one who makes fun by mocking.”⁸⁰ Scoffing reveals both arrogance and disdain, a proud dismissal of another person or idea as being beneath oneself. This scoffing will take place “in the last days,” an expression that refers to the time when God will fulfill his promises of a new creation ruled by his Davidic Messiah. The NT writers make clear that the last days have begun with the first advent of Christ and will be consummated when Jesus returns to establish a new heavens and earth (3:13).

Jesus also warned of the presence of false prophets in the last days (Matt. 24:9–14). Along with their scoffing, they are “following their own sinful desires.” Scoffing at God and his promises never stands alone in a moral vacuum; it is accompanied by a self-directed morality that indulges the whims of the individual. Like the man described in Psalm 1:1, these individuals walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the path of sinners, and sit in the seat of scoffers. The presence of these scoffers ironically confirms the very divine revelation they deny.

3:4 The scoffers “will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming?’” Just as false prophets mockingly asked Jeremiah when God’s word would be fulfilled (Jer. 17:15), so too these false teachers scoff at the promise of Christ’s return. As an eyewitness of the first “coming of our Lord Jesus” (2 Pet. 1:16), Peter also heard Jesus promise to return at the end of the age (Matt. 24:13–31). The false teachers’ scoffing at Christ’s promise is based on this logic: “Ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” While the term “fathers” could refer to the original group of Jesus’ followers,⁸¹ in the NT this term consistently refers to the OT patriarchs (John 7:22; Acts 13:32; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:1). The next phrase confirms this conclusion: the scoffers claim that things have remained the same “from the beginning of creation.” They argue that the world has continued as it has been since the deaths of the patriarchs, with no dramatic intervention of God, especially in judgment. Such an assertion, of course, blatantly ignores the repeated acts of God throughout the OT in bringing both judgment and salvation (2 Pet. 2:3b–22). Furthermore, claiming that essentially nothing has changed since the death of the patriarchs denies the central claim of Christianity: God took on flesh, lived among us as a man, died a brutal death for our sins, and rose victoriously from the grave.

⁸⁰ Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. ἐμπαίκτης (§33.407).

⁸¹ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 290–295.

3:5 Scoffers scoff because “they deliberately overlook this fact.” The verb rendered “overlook” (*lanthanō*) has the sense of something hidden or out of sight (Mark 7:24; Luke 8:47; Acts 26:26). The omission in view here is not accidental but is undertaken “deliberately.” The scoffers are aware of what Peter is about to note, but they simply choose to disregard it. The “fact” in view has two parts. First is that “the heavens existed long ago.” Just as the condemnation of the false teachers was determined long ago (2 Pet. 2:3), so too the existence of the heavens is nothing new. Perhaps Peter has Psalm 102:25 in mind: “Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.”

The second part of “this fact” is that “the earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God.” Genesis 1:9–10 describes how God gathered the waters together so that the dry ground would appear. Psalm 24:2 asserts that God “founded it [the earth] upon the seas and established it upon the rivers.” The instrument God used to do this was his “word.” In Genesis 1 God speaks creation into existence, a truth Scripture affirms elsewhere (Pss. 33:6–9; 148:5–6; Rom. 4:17; Heb. 11:3). The NT helps us to see that the word in view here is not merely the speech of God but also the second person of the Trinity (John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16); the word rendered “formed” (*synestēmi*) describes in Colossians 1:17 how Christ holds creation together. Like OT prophets before him, Peter calls heaven and earth as witnesses to testify against the rebellious ways of humanity (Deut. 4:26; 32:1; Isa. 1:2; Jer. 2:12).

3:6 It is “by means of” water and the word of God that the Lord brought judgment on “the world that then existed” (i.e., the pre-flood world).⁸² The world “was deluged with water and perished.” “Perished” (*apollymi*) can refer to either physical (Matt. 8:25) or eternal death (John 3:16). Hebrews 1:11 (quoting Ps. 102:26) describes how one day both heaven and earth will perish, though God remains forever. Of course, only the context can determine the extent of the destruction in view; after all, the heavens and earth did not cease to exist when God destroyed them with the flood. God destroyed the world as it was “deluged with water.” This verb (*kataklyzō*) occurs nowhere else in the NT but does appear several times in the LXX in the context of judgment, such as to describe a “deluge of rain” on false prophets who promised peace when God’s wrath was in fact at hand (Ezek. 13:8–16). Peter has already pictured the flood as a type of eschatological judgment (2 Pet. 2:5). Here it serves that same purpose as a counterargument against the false teachers’ claim that “all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation” (3:4). The scoffers deliberately overlook the reality of the flood, to their own destruction.

3:7 Peter now applies the lesson to be learned from the flood. It was because of the unbreakable word of God that the pre-flood world was destroyed, and, “by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire.” Paul strikes

⁸² Instead of “by means of water” (*di’ hōn*) some manuscripts read “because of water” (*di’ hon*); cf. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 376–377.

a similar note in Romans 2:5 when he writes that the unrepentant “are storing up wrath for [themselves] on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” God is storing up the present creation “for fire,” a common means of judgment. As mentioned in 2 Peter 2:6–7, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven (Gen. 19:24). Both Scripture (Isa. 66:15; Ezek. 38:22; Rev. 20:9–15) and Jewish literature (1 *En.* 1:6; 97:2; *Testament of Levi* 4:1) portray eschatological judgment in fiery terms.

Peter further explains that the present heavens and earth are “being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.” For the fourth time Peter uses a form of the verb translated “being kept” (*tēreō*), each time in connection with judgment (cf. 2 Pet. 2:4, 9, 17). This verb stresses God’s active sovereignty over the judgment. The expression “day of judgment” is another way of referring to the day of the Lord, at which time God will bring final salvation to his people and eternal destruction on his enemies (3:10).

3:8 Whereas the scoffers “overlook” certain key facts (3:5), Peter admonishes believers to “not overlook this one fact.” By calling them “beloved,” Peter reminds his readers of God’s special love for them shown in Jesus Christ. The one fact they are not to overlook is “that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” God’s relationship to time transcends our finite minds, for he has always existed (Job 36:26). The expression here should be understood not as a strict mathematical formula but as a general maxim revealing God’s perception and experience of time. Peter likely alludes to Psalm 90:4—“A thousand years in your sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night.”

3:9 Peter asserts that “the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness.” Drawing language from Habakkuk 2:3, Peter reminds his audience that God is not slow to bring judgment on his enemies (Deut. 7:10) or to bring saving righteousness to his people (Isa. 46:13). The “promise” is Christ’s second coming, which the scoffers reject (2 Pet. 3:4). The apparent delay is in fact the divine timetable’s moving forward toward the climactic day of the Lord (3:10). Instead of thinking God is slow to keep his promises, one should recognize that he “is patient toward you.” God’s patience is central to his identity; he revealed himself to Moses as “slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6–7). The reason for this patience is that God is “not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” God’s moral will is that no one “should perish” (Ezek. 33:11); with open arms he invites sinners to receive his mercy (Isa. 65:1–5).⁸³ Rather than visiting immediate judgment, God desires that “all should reach repentance.” Drawing on Jewish tradition, Peter ties the timing of the last day with the repentance of God’s people.⁸⁴ This language portrays repentance as a destination, which God’s kindness and patience allows sinners to “reach” (Rom. 2:4).

⁸³ Cf. further *ibid.*, 381–382.

⁸⁴ Bauckham, *Jude*, 2 *Peter*, 312–314.

3:10 However, God's patience will not last indefinitely: "the day of the Lord will come like a thief." The "day of the Lord" refers to an appointed day when God will bring judgment on his enemies and salvation for his people (Joel 2:28–32). Sometimes it refers to an impending judgment on a specific people or nation (Obad. 15–18), while at other times it points to the end of human history (Isa. 24:1–23). In some contexts it seems to refer to both (Zeph. 1:2–18). In other words, throughout redemptive history there has been a series of "days of the Lord" in anticipation of the final climactic "day of the Lord" at the end of history. These past days included events such as the destruction of various nations/kingdoms (Jer. 46:10), the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC (Isa. 22:2–25), the crucifixion (Matt. 27:45–54), and the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–41). Cosmic phenomena often accompany these descriptions of the day of the Lord (Joel 2:28–32). In the NT the day of the Lord is often referred to as the day of Christ (1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6, 10; 2:16; 2 Thess. 1:5–12). Jesus had compared his coming to a "thief" in the night (Matt. 24:43), stressing the sudden and unexpected nature of his return.

Peter describes three things that will happen when the day of the Lord comes. First, "the heavens will pass away with a roar." "Pass away" (*parerchomai*) has the sense of "to come to an end and so no longer be there."⁸⁵ It occurs in connection with the future of heaven and/or earth twice in Matthew as well (Matt. 5:18; 24:35). The onomatopoeic adverb rendered "with a roar" (*rhoizēdon*) occurs nowhere else in the LXX, NT, or Jewish or early Christian literature. It refers to "a rushing sound, whether the whizzing of an arrow, the rush of wings, or the hissing of snakes. In this context we should think of the crackling sound of fire, destroying the heavens."⁸⁶

Second, "the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved." The word translated "heavenly bodies" (*stoicheion*) is often rendered "elements" (ESV mg.), referring to the basic elements of the universe as understood in antiquity: earth, air, fire, and water.⁸⁷ Thus the entire cosmos will be "dissolved" (*lyō*), a word that in this context means "to reduce something by violence into its components."⁸⁸ The elements "will be burned up" (*kausoō*), which here may have the specific sense of "burn with intense heat."⁸⁹ Whether Peter envisions the complete destruction of the world or its purification by fire is unclear, although the language here perhaps favors destruction.⁹⁰

Third, "the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."⁹¹ All of humanity must stand before God to give an account of the deeds done in this life. Everything that has ever happened in human history "will be exposed." This verb (*heuriskō*) usually means "to find" but in some contexts can have the sense of

⁸⁵ BDAG, s.v. παρέρχομαι (3).

⁸⁶ Schreiner, 1, 2 Peter, Jude, 383–384.

⁸⁷ NIDNTTE, 4:379. Isaiah 34:4 contains similar language using different vocabulary.

⁸⁸ BDAG, s.v. λύω (3).

⁸⁹ LSJ, s.v. καυσόω.

⁹⁰ See the helpful discussion in Moo, 2 Peter, Jude, 200–202.

⁹¹ Some manuscripts read "will not be found" while others read "will be burned up." This is one of the most difficult variants in the NT; cf. the discussion in Bauckham, Jude, 2 Peter, 316–321.

“discover intellectually through reflection, observation, examination, or investigation,” sometimes as the result of a judicial investigation (John 18:38; 19:4–6; Acts 13:28; 23:9).⁹² As such, Peter means that all that has happened will be laid bare on the day of the Lord, an idea echoed by Paul (Rom. 2:15–16) and Jesus (Matt. 10:26).

3:11 Peter applies 3:8–10 (“Since all these things are thus to be dissolved”) by asking, “what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?” The reality of the day of the Lord demands we live in a certain way,⁹³ summarized by two words. First, we must be characterized by “holiness” (*hagios*). Believers are called to be holy because God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15–16) and has made us a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5) and holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). Our lives should demonstrate that we are set apart for God’s purposes in this world, not our own selfish agendas. Second, it must be characterized by “godliness” (*eusebeia*), on which see comment on 2 Peter 1:3–4.

3:12 Pursuing a life of holiness and godliness is necessary because believers are “waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God.” The “waiting” in view is not passive; it is an eager anticipation of the day when creation will be set free from its curse and believers will be physically raised from the dead (Rom. 8:19–23). But what does it mean for believers to be “hastening” the coming of the day of God? Based on Isaiah 60:22, some Jewish texts speak of God’s hastening the end, sometimes in connection with Israel’s repentance (*Sir.* 36:8; *2 Baruch* 20:1–2; 54:1; 83:1).⁹⁴ The mention of repentance in 2 Peter 3:9 makes this possible here, although Peter may also have in view our godly lives, prayers (Matt. 6:10), and evangelistic efforts (Matt. 24:14). Of course, God is fully sovereign and in control of human history, but he accomplishes his purposes through the actions of his people, ordained before the foundation of the world (Eph. 2:10). The “day of God” is simply another way of referring to the day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:10).

When that day comes, “the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved.” Peter reiterates what he has said in 3:10 concerning the destruction of the present heavens, adding that it will be done by fire (3:7). On “dissolved,” see comment on 3:10. Because of the coming of the day of God, “the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn.” On “heavenly bodies” (*stoicheia*), see comment on 3:10. Although the verb rendered “melt” (*tēkō*) occurs nowhere else in the NT, it is used metaphorically in the LXX to describe the defeat and judgment of God’s enemies (Ex. 15:15; Isa. 24:23; 34:4; 64:1; Mic. 1:4; Nah. 1:6; Hab. 3:6; Zech. 14:12).

3:13 Having described what will happen to the wicked on the day of God, Peter now turns to what awaits God’s people: “According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth.” Peter has in mind Isaiah 65:17–25, where the prophet envisions the day when God consummates his promises and causes his people to dwell in a world free from the stain of sin and the curse. Although this is

⁹² BDAG, s.v. εὐρίσκω (2). See further Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 385–387.

⁹³ Peter uses the same word (*anastrophē*), translated “conduct,” in 2:7 (cf. comment there).

⁹⁴ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 325; D. A. Carson, “2 Peter,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 1059–1060.

not the only place in the OT Prophets where God promises to transform creation (cf. Amos 9:13–15), this theme is especially prominent in Isaiah (cf. Isa. 43:16–21; 51:3). The NT authors pick up this language at several points also (Rom. 8:19–23; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). The theme culminates in Revelation 21–22, where John describes the new heavens and new earth in breathtaking imagery.

Perhaps drawing language from Isaiah 32:16 and 60:21, Peter describes the new heavens and new earth as a place “in which righteousness dwells.” The new creation will be characterized by righteousness, in contrast to the wickedness and effects of sin and the curse pervading this current world (2 Pet. 2:9, 15). Ultimately, righteousness dwells there because the Righteous One himself will dwell there with his people (Rev. 21:3).

Response

From this rich passage, there are at least three areas for reflection.

First, people have a tendency to forget things, not merely in the sense of not being able to recollect a date or a face but also in the sense of failing to put into action things they know intellectually. God warned the Israelites as they were approaching the Promised Land of the dangers of forgetting what he had done for them (Deut. 8:11–20), and as believers we are just as prone to forget all that God has done for us in Christ. Therefore it is essential for God’s people to be reminded of the gospel regularly and to be taught how to apply it to various aspects of life. We must be “whole-Bible” Christians in order to follow Jesus faithfully, understanding how the individual stories and books relate to the larger narrative that runs from Genesis to Revelation, climaxes in the person and work of Christ, and culminates in a new heavens and earth. Therefore, all who teach the Word must make this a central task of their ministry.

Second, God’s timetable is often very different from ours. When we lose sight of God’s eternal nature and sovereign rule of this world, it is easy for us to conclude that God should be doing things faster. But God’s timing is perfect, and as believers we can rest in the comfort of knowing that God is never late. What seems like a delay is in fact God’s patience in allowing time for repentance (Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9). But rest assured—that patience will one day end, and the day of the Lord will come suddenly.

Finally, eschatology matters. Peter is concerned not with detailed timelines of the end times but with the kind of lives we should live now because we know the end is coming. If we truly believe that God will one day bring judgment on the wicked and usher in a new heavens and earth, then our lives should be characterized by a wholehearted devotion that orients the entirety of our lives toward God and his purposes in this world. This hope is our anchor amid a world twisted by the fall. What the first Adam broke, the last Adam has begun to fix. One day, that task will be complete, and “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9). When this reality captures our hearts, it not only motivates us to live in holiness but also prompts us to cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev. 22:20).

2 PETER 3:14–18

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. ¹⁵And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, ¹⁶as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. ¹⁷You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. ¹⁸But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Section Overview

Peter closes his letter with a series of four commands that believers should obey as they wait for Christ's return: (1) be diligent to pursue godliness; (2) consider God's patience as an opportunity for more people to be saved; (3) take care not to be carried away from the path of righteousness; and (4) grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ. All of this is done for God's present and future glory.

Section Outline

- III. Letter Closing (3:14–18)
 - A. Be Diligent (3:14)
 - B. Count God's Patience's as Salvation (3:15–16)
 - C. Take Care (3:17)
 - D. Grow in the Grace and Knowledge of Christ (3:18)

3:14 Peter now applies our hope to life in the present: "Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these." Because believers are waiting for the new heavens and new earth (3:13), we should "be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace." The same diligence applied to making our calling and election sure (1:10) must be applied to the pursuit of moral purity. The verb "found" (*heuriskō*) refers here to God's assessment of mankind on the last day (3:10; Phil. 3:9).

The goal is to be found on that day "without spot or blemish," just as Christ was "a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet. 1:19). This combination of descriptors means to be untainted in character and without defect. Peter's language comes from the sacrificial system, in which sacrifices were to be without flaw or

imperfection. On the last day, God's people will be found without spot or blemish because they will be reflections of Christ, the spotless Lamb of God. On the last day believers will also be found to be "at peace." Thus peace is both a present reality (2 Pet. 1:2) and a future hope for believers.

3:15–16 The second part of Peter's application is to "count the patience of our Lord as salvation." This echoes what the apostle said in 3:9, where he reminded his readers that the apparent slowness of Christ's return is an expression of God's patience in providing time for people to repent. Peter is not alone in this contention; he notes that "our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him." While Peter may have a specific passage/letter in mind (e.g., Rom. 2:4), he more likely refers to a general theme in Paul's letters. Peter perhaps bolsters his argument with Pauline support because the false teachers had twisted Peter's own teaching in order to support their dangerous beliefs and practices. Despite not always being in agreement (Gal. 2:11–14), Peter regarded his fellow apostle Paul as a dear brother in the same spiritual family, serving the same Lord, and preaching the same gospel. What Paul wrote was "according to the wisdom given him." As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul received from God wisdom and insight into "the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:1–6), and Peter gladly affirmed this truth.

This wisdom is shown "in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters." Peter not only knows of multiple Pauline letters but also expects that his recipients know of them as well. By the time of this epistle, most of Paul's letters had been written. At some point a collection of Paul's letters (perhaps compiled by Paul himself) began to circulate, but we cannot say confidently if it had happened by the time when Peter wrote.⁹⁵ The expression "these matters" probably encompasses not only the patience of the Lord but also the other issues Peter has addressed, such as the promise of a new heavens and new earth and, until that consummation, the presence and danger of false teachers.

Peter admits that "there are some things in [Paul's letters] that are hard to understand." This rare adjective (*dysnoētos*) "was sometimes applied to Greek oracles—notoriously ambiguous and difficult to apply."⁹⁶ Even the original recipients sometimes misunderstood what Paul meant (1 Cor. 5:9–10). But Peter has in mind "the ignorant and unstable," those who have not been disciplined in the apostolic teaching and therefore lack the firm foundation the true gospel brings (2 Pet. 1:12). As a result, they are like the "unsteady souls," susceptible to the false teachers' lies (2:13–14). Such people take Paul's letters and "twist" them "to their own destruction." "Twist" (*strebloō*) was used "in various senses of wrenching dislocated limbs for the purpose of setting them, and of the use of tortuous devices in the course of inquiries."⁹⁷ Such distortions of Paul's letters

⁹⁵ For helpful discussion, see Stanley E. Porter, *How We Got the New Testament: Text, Transmission, Translation*, Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 106–120.

⁹⁶ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 211.

⁹⁷ BDAG, s.v. στρεβλόω (2).

can lead only to sharing in the eternal destruction awaiting the ungodly on the last day (2:1–3; 3:7).

These false teachers distort Paul's letters just "as they do the other Scriptures." The significance of what Peter says here should not be missed. He includes Paul's letters in the category of Scripture, as divinely inspired authoritative writings on the same level as the OT. The idea of the apostles' written teaching possessing the same authority as the OT is not a later development in church history but a fundamental truth of the first generation of Christians.

3:17 Because his readers know beforehand that the ignorant and unstable twist the Scriptures, Peter exhorts them to "take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability." "Take care" (*phyllassō*) in this context means "to be on one's guard against" something or someone;⁹⁸ it speaks of a state of watchful vigilance. The purpose of being on guard is not to "lose your own stability." The nautical term rendered "lose" (*ekpiptō*) often refers to a ship blown off course and run aground (Acts 27:17–32). What is at stake is one's "stability" (*stērigmos*), a term that can refer to either a position of security or one's firm commitment and belief.⁹⁹ Both senses fit the context here. In contrast to the "unstable" (*astēriktōi*; 2 Pet. 3:16), who distort Scripture, those who cling to the true gospel have "stability" (*stērigmos*).

Losing one's stability happens in conjunction with being "carried away with the error of lawless people." False teaching is pictured as a dangerous flood sweeping away those who have not built themselves on the rock of the true gospel (Matt. 7:24–27).¹⁰⁰ Paul uses this same verb (*synapagō*) in Galatians 2:13 to describe Barnabas's being swept up in the hypocrisy of the Judaizers. The danger lies in the current of the "error of lawless people," another expression for the false teachers (2 Pet. 2:8, 18).

3:18 It is not enough simply to avoid false teachers; one must also "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." Peter began this letter by praying for grace to be multiplied to his readers (1:2), and now he concludes it with a call to grow in that grace. Following the growth plan laid out in 1:3–11 ensures present stability and future glory. This grace comes from "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," the one who rules the universe and rescues his people from sin (1:1). We experience greater measures of God's grace as we grow in our knowledge of Christ (Phil. 3:7–14).

Peter concludes his letter with a doxology: "To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity." The ultimate goal of everything is the display of God's glory—his beauty, power, and majesty. God's glory is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ (John 1:14–18), who is the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). As such, Christ deserves glory now as well as "to

⁹⁸ BDAG, s.v. φυλάσσω (3).

⁹⁹ BDAG, s.v. στηριγμός.

¹⁰⁰ MM, 602.

the day of eternity.” This unusual expression points back to the day of the Lord (2 Pet. 3:8–13) and “probably refers to the eschatological age as a day which will dawn at the Parousia (1:19) and last forever.”¹⁰¹

Response

Just as the letter began on a note of diligence in the pursuit of growth in godliness (1:3–11; 3:14), it ends striking a similar key. Such diligence is grounded in the grace of what God has done for us in Christ and flows from our relational knowledge of him (1:2–3; 3:17). God’s glory is not just the means by which he calls us into a relationship with him (1:3); it is also the ultimate goal of lives of godliness and holiness (3:18).

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¹⁰¹ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 338.

1 JOHN

Ray Van Neste

INTRODUCTION TO 1–3 JOHN

Overview

The three letters known as First, Second, and Third John show us a pastor caring for his dearly loved flock as they endure difficult times. In each letter the author stresses the importance of love, obedience, and doctrinal fidelity (particularly an orthodox view of the person and work of Jesus). He makes it clear that these three points are interrelated. One cannot love God without loving his people and his commands. As a result of this emphasis, these letters are rich with guidance for everyday Christian living.

As Augustine said, with regards to 1 John, “This book is very sweet to every healthy Christian heart that savors the bread of God, and it should constantly be in the mind of God’s holy church.”¹ Martin Hengel was surely right when he asserted that these letters are “the voice of a towering theologian.”²

Author

Although the text of 1, 2, and 3 John does not mention an author by name, across the centuries the overwhelming majority of Christians have believed that John the apostle wrote these letters (as well as the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse, or Revelation). However, the majority of scholars today argue that someone else wrote these letters, perhaps even in the second century. This skepticism, standing athwart the testimony of centuries of Christians, has become very common in modern scholarship, but there is good reason to be skeptical of such skepticism.

First John claims to be written by an eyewitness of the ministry of Christ, and significant work has been done to demonstrate the plausibility of this claim.³ The author speaks with the conscious authority and knowledge of an apostle. He is an eyewitness to Christ (1 John 1:1–4; 4:14), speaks for God (1 John 4:6), asserts doctrinal standards (2 John 10), and expects that a personal visit will sort out any who resist his authority (3 John 9–10). As John Stott notes, “There is nothing

1 Cited in Gerald Bray, ed., *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ACCS (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 166.

2 Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1989), ix.

3 This work usually centers on John’s Gospel and then notes the implications for John’s letters. Cf. especially B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Authorized Version with Introduction and Notes* (London: John Murray, 1882), v–xxxv; B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text, with Notes and Essays* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1886), xxx–xxxii.

tentative or apologetic about what he writes.”⁴ This sort of claim and behavior is appropriate only for an apostle. Thus we cannot claim that this author is simply a good teacher. He is either an apostle or an impostor.

Furthermore, all of the ancient manuscript copies we have of these letters bear the name “John” in their titles or subscriptions.⁵ Thus, despite the common claim, they are not, strictly speaking, anonymous. In short, we have letters asserting apostolic authority, directing churches, and claiming to be from “John” that were accepted by the ancient church, which rejected anything of dubious origin. Even skeptical scholars concede that the language of 1–3 John is related closely to that of the Gospel of John, as Christians have noted for centuries. Further, we have evidence of the letters of John being used as Scripture as early as the mid-second century.⁶ Thus, unless these letters are inherently deceitful and the early church—which was much closer to the time, language, and culture of these letters than we are—was completely taken in, the most plausible understanding is that these three letters were written by John the apostle.⁷

Date and Occasion

There is no real certainty about the order in which these letters were written, though the general similarity of their concerns suggests they were written in short succession. The letters are commonly thought to have been written in the late first century, and several patristic sources place John in Ephesus at this time (e.g., Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Clement of Rome).⁸ The book of Revelation shows us that Ephesus was a challenging place in which to be a Christian at the close of the first century, with persecution and false teaching both threatening the church.

It is apparent from 1 John 2:19 that there had been a schism in the church to which John wrote his first letter. Some who had professed faith in Christ had left the church and followed some form of deviant teaching. Apparently those who left the church claimed to be the true believers, but they held to a deficient view of Jesus. John rebukes their willingness to separate from the church as evidence of a lack of love for fellow Christians. John also writes to assure those who remained about true doctrine. The repeated use of the phrase “by this we know” (e.g., 1 John 2:3, 5; 3:19, 24; 4:13) shows that John is seeking to help these beleaguered believers discern truth and hold fast to it (2:26). John, as a faithful pastor, writes so that these people may be assured of their faith (5:13), thereby having fellowship with him (1:3). Their perseverance will complete his joy (1:4).

Second John seems to have been written for reasons very similar to 1 John, as the apostle warns against false teachers and calls for perseverance in truth and

4 John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988), 37.

5 Robert Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 12. Among later manuscripts, Yarbrough mentions only three that lack John's name, from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Cf. his thorough discussion (12–13).

6 Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

7 For further discussion of authorship, cf. Bruce Schuchard, *1–3 John*, ConcC (St. Louis: Concordia, 2012), 33–58; and Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 5–15.

8 Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 17.

love for fellow believers. Third John contains more personal references, providing a more concrete understanding of the letter's setting. In this letter John deals with Diotrephes, who is disrupting the church by seeking to assume control of the congregation.

Genre and Literary Features

Second and Third John readily fit the model of typical Hellenistic letters, with expected Christian modifications. First John lacks many of these typical letter elements (such as greetings and identification) yet clearly expresses itself as being written to specific recipients who have shared experiences with the author (1:4; 2:1, 7, 8, 12–14, 21, 26; 5:13). It is certainly not an abstract treatise, and the earliest church called it a letter.⁹ Thus these are three pastoral letters written to urge faithfulness to the gospel and its ethical implications.

One of the most striking features of John's letters is his repetition and interweaving of themes. For example, in 1 John three commonly noted themes (holiness, love, and correct doctrine) recur throughout the letter, interwoven with one another rather than being treated sequentially, as we might expect today. R. W. L. Moberly says it well:

John's pattern of thinking does not involve sequential logic in the manner of conventional argument so much as the literary equivalent of musical variations on a theme—a constant circling around the basic issue, coming at it from a variety of angles, developing now this aspect and now that aspect, balancing one statement with another to clarify what is and is not entailed, returning to a point already made so that it may be seen afresh in the light of what has been said subsequently.¹⁰

John also commonly sets one sentence after another without stating the logical connection between them. We must examine the context, both literary and theological, in order to discern his logical connections and thus his flow of thought. This general flow of thought can be discerned, although the specific structure is widely debated.

Theology of John's Letters

GOD

Christology is the central theological focus of these letters. Jesus is fully human (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7), as well as the "true God" (1 John 5:20) and Messiah (1 John 2:22) who died on behalf of his people (1 John 1:7; 2:2; 5:6). John asserts these truths in the face of false teachers who were denying it. The result is a rich portrayal of the ministry of Jesus to believers. In 1 John, Jesus brings eternal life (1:2), cleanses from sin (1:7), intercedes before the father (2:1), died a propitiatory death

⁹ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 19.

¹⁰ Cited in Karen Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 38.

(2:2), confirms knowledge (2:20), destroys the Devil's works (3:8), teaches the meaning of love (3:16), and gives the Holy Spirit (3:24).¹¹

This focus on the person of Jesus leads to strong Trinitarian affirmation. Jesus is “the Father’s Son” (2 John 3) and the “Son [of God]” (1 John 1:3, 7; 2:23–24; 3:8, 23; 4:9–10, 14–15; 5:5, 9–12, 13, 20), but he is also God himself. Thus he is distinct from, yet one with, the Father. In 1 John 3:24 the Holy Spirit is given by the Son, while in 4:13 he is given by the Father, and thus he is distinct from both. Yet he is the Spirit of God (4:2). Furthermore, in 1 John 5:6–8 the Spirit bears witness to the Son, and in verse 9 this testimony is called the “testimony of God.” These points lead to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity: one God in three persons.

Lastly, on this point, Yarbrough powerfully articulates the God-centeredness of these letters and is worth quoting at length:

If 1–3 John leave the disciple who studies them with any single lasting impression, it is the grandeur and centrality of God. . . . These letters are not simply theological, as one might say ale is alcoholic; they are rather theology distillate, analogous to highest-proof grain alcohol that is highly flammable and intoxicating in even small amounts. God—mainly Father and Son, but occasionally Holy Spirit—suffuses every situation John envisions, each piece of counsel he issues, every sentiment he conveys, each affirmation he sets forth. No OT psalmist is any more God saturated in awareness than the writer of these letters.¹²

SANCTIFICATION

With John's strong assertions of the necessity of obedience and righteousness, these letters contribute much to our understanding of sanctification, the lifelong growth of a born-again Christian into greater obedience and holiness. Conversion radically changes a person so that the differences between the converted and the lost world should be readily apparent (1 John 3:10). It is a mark of believers that they “keep” or “obey” God's commands (1 John 2:3–6; 3:24; 5:2), that they do good (3 John 11), seek purity (1 John 3:3), and “practice righteousness” (1 John 3:7–10). In fact, they are not able to remain in a state of sinning (1 John 1:6; 5:18). There is no place here for the idea that people can be genuinely converted and then continue undisturbed in their sin with no concern for the things of God. Love, like faith, will produce works.

John, however, does not teach perfectionism. He anticipates believers' continuing to sin (1 John 1:8–10). He writes to help us fight against sin, but such a fight does not include ignoring or minimizing such sin. Rather, it involves confessing our sin (1 John 1:9), looking to our advocate, Jesus, and then pursuing holiness (1 John 2:1–2). Believers still struggle with sin but ought to be moving toward righteousness. We progress in holiness by being assured of the forgiveness of our

¹¹ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 316.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27–28.

sins (1 John 1:9; 2:1, 12) and by responding to the love of God, shown to us particularly in the atoning death of Jesus.

ECCLESIOLOGY

The repeated exhortations to love one another should significantly inform our ecclesiology (doctrine of the church). John envisions the church as a community of people who care deeply for one another and invest fully in one another. As the exposition of relevant texts in the commentary will show, the love John enjoins is no mere sentiment or emotion but is aggressive, devoted care. This costly care is not mentioned as an option for the particularly committed but is presented as the basic way of life for any true believer.

Christians are responsible for one another in terms of helping with basic needs (1 John 3:17) as well as helping each other persevere in the faith (1 John 5:16). John assumes we will know of one another's needs and sins. Otherwise, his exhortations make no sense. This sort of care makes most sense in local congregations where people do not merely see one another once a week but engage with one another regularly for mutual support, help, and care.¹³

PASTORAL CARE

It is instructive to notice how John pastors his flock in these letters. His love for them radiates from each page with his consistent use of terms of endearment: "beloved," (1 John 3:2; 4:1, 7; 3 John 2, 5); "whom I love," (2 John 1; 3 John 1); "little children" (1 John 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21); or "my [little] children" (1 John 2:1; 3 John 4). He writes not simply to declare truth or to discharge a duty but to protect his readers from deception (1 John 2:26), to keep them from sin (1 John 2:1), to ensure that they remain in fellowship with God (1 John 1:3), and to give them assurance of eternal life (1 John 5:13). He labors for the souls of those he loves. This is the task of the pastor, the one who oversees souls (Heb. 13:17). John is no mere hireling; rather, he toils for these people because their faithfulness brings him great joy (1 John 1:4; 2 John 4; 3 John 4). It is in this relational context that John's blunt, direct statements are made. It is too easy for leaders to enjoy a reputation for being blunt and witty without truly caring for those who hear them. John shows a better way. Bernard of Clairvaux imitated this pattern when he said, "Boldly I speak, because faithfully I love."¹⁴

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

John's letters are in many ways the teachings found in John's Gospel applied to specific pastoral situations. The letters are a key witness to the person and work of Christ, declaring the absolute necessity of believing in Jesus' deity and humanity. These letters also show how ethics and doctrine are inseparable.

¹³ For further discussion of this topic cf. Ray Van Neste, "The Church in the General Epistles," in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendell Easley and Christopher Morgan (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 150–153.

¹⁴ *Saint Bernard Abbot of Clairvaux: Selections from His Writings*, trans. Horatio Grimley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1910), 119.

Preaching from John's Letters

The main clause of the weighty prologue in 1 John is “we proclaim” (1 John 1:3), and the substance of the proclamation in view is Christ. First John is a letter about Christological preaching that demonstrates the gospel’s ethical implications. All three letters are about who and what should be proclaimed, and the ethical results of such preaching.

The issues of obedience to God’s commands and love for fellow believers are perennially relevant, so finding application for these letters should not be challenging. The importance of holding fast to correct doctrine is also continually relevant, even though some today fail to realize it. These letters will push preachers to proclaim that certain key doctrines must be believed in order for one to know God.

These letters are also particularly focused on discerning whether or not one is truly converted. This makes these texts significant resources for preaching in an age that affirms vague spirituality but avoids clear delineation of truth and boundaries. These are helpful pastoral resources for enabling people to discern their spiritual condition.

The repetition in 1 John can be a challenge as the same basic points continue to appear. Some may wonder about the best way to preach through such a letter: Should the preacher gather all of the texts on each theme and preach them together in order to avoid repetitive sermons on the same themes? Although this is possible, it is perhaps most useful to preach sequentially through the texts, allowing the divinely inspired repetition to accentuate the importance of the themes and help them sink deep into our hearts. This also allows the preacher to hone his exposition on these themes.

Interpretive Challenges

The primary interpretive challenge in these letters is deciding where to break each paragraph or section. The commentaries differ widely in several places. However, these decisions do not significantly alter the interpretation of each text.

Within the letters are several particularly challenging texts, which are treated in their respective places in the commentary.

Outline to 1 John

- I. Prologue: Authoritative Witness to the Incarnation (1:1–4)
- II. The Necessity of Holiness (1:5–2:2)
 - A. God’s Utter Holiness (1:5)
 - B. God’s People Must Be Holy (1:6–7)
 - C. Holiness Involves Confessing Our Sins (1:8–9)
 - D. We Can Confess because We Have an Advocate (1:10–2:2)
- III. The Necessity of Obedience (2:3–6)
- IV. The Necessity of Loving Fellow Christians (2:7–11)
 - A. The Old Yet New Command (2:7–8)
 - B. Love and Light, Hate and Darkness (2:9–11)

- V. Gospel Encouragements (2:12–14)
- VI. The Snare of Loving the World (2:15–17)
 - A. Do Not Love the World (2:15)
 - B. Reasons Not to Love the World (2:16–17)
 - 1. The World Is Not of God (2:16)
 - 2. The World Is Passing Away (2:17)
- VII. The Necessity of Discernment (2:18–27)
 - A. The Reality of Antichrist (2:18)
 - B. Apostasy (2:19)
 - C. Affirmation of the Faithful (2:20–21)
 - D. Antichrist Denies the Son (2:22–23)
 - E. Call to Abide (2:24–27)
- VIII. Confidence as God's Children at Christ's Return (2:28–3:10)
 - A. Abiding and Righteous Living as Preparation for Christ's Return (2:28–3:3)
 - B. Righteous Living as a Consequence of Being God's Children (3:4–10)
- IX. The Necessity of Love and Gospel Comfort (3:11–24)
 - A. Renewed Call to Love (3:11)
 - B. Love versus Hate and Murder (3:12–15)
 - C. The Cross as the Ultimate Example of Love (3:16–18)
 - D. Assurance despite Our Failures (3:19–24)
- X. The Necessity of Discernment and the Spirit of Antichrist (4:1–6)
 - A. Call to Discernment (4:1)
 - B. The Test: Confession of Jesus (4:2–3)
 - C. Comfort to a Rattled Church (4:4–5)
 - D. Confirmation: Listening to God and His Apostles (4:6)
- XI. Love That Reveals God (4:7–12)
 - A. Love Is Nonnegotiable (4:7–8)
 - B. The Supreme Example of Love: The Cross (4:9–10)
 - C. The Practice of Love and Its Result (4:11–12)
- XII. Abiding in God and Perfected Love (4:13–21)
 - A. Three Evidences of Conversion (4:13–16)
 - 1. Having Received the Spirit (4:13)
 - 2. Confessing that Jesus Is the Son of God (4:14–15)
 - 3. Abiding in Love (4:16)
 - B. Elaboration on Love (4:17–21)
- XIII. Faith in Jesus Overcomes the World (5:1–5)
 - A. Interconnectedness of Faith, Love, and Obedience (5:1–3)
 - B. Faith Overcomes the World (5:4–5)
- XIV. Testimony to the Person of Christ (5:6–12)
- XV. Summary and Conclusion: Assurance (5:13–21)
 - A. Assurance of Eternal Life (5:13)

- B. Assurance of Answered Prayer (5:14–17)
 - 1. Statement of Assurance in Prayer (5:14–15)
 - 2. Specific Example: Prayer for an Erring Brother (5:16–17)
- C. Assurance of Spiritual Protection (5:18)
- D. Assurance of Belonging to God (5:19)
- E. Assurance of the Truth of Jesus (5:20)
- F. Closing Charge (5:21)

1 JOHN 1:1–4

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ²the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And we are writing these things so that our¹ joy may be complete.

¹Some manuscripts *your*

Section Overview

John opens this letter not with typical identifications and greetings but with a forceful affirmation of the truth of the incarnation, grounded in eyewitness testimony. The flow of thought may be challenging for us to follow, but the point is clear. Later in the letter we learn that the reality of the incarnation was in some way being denied by many who used to be a part of the congregation John was addressing.

Section Outline

- I. Prologue: Authoritative Witness to the Incarnation (1:1–4)

Comment

1:1 In verses 1–3, the explicit focus is Jesus. He is the referent of the repeated relative pronoun “which.” He is the “word of life,” the “eternal life” (v. 2), “that which” John proclaims (v. 3). The essential thing said about Jesus here, though, is that John (and those with him) has personally witnessed the reality of his incarnation.

“We” could simply be a way for John to refer to himself, but more likely it refers to his participation in the apostolic band that together bears this witness. Thus

John emphasizes that this witness is not of one man alone but of the apostles as a whole. John stresses that he and others have “seen” (also vv. 2, 3; “looked upon”; v. 1), “heard” (v. 3), and “touched” Jesus. The fact that Jesus “was from the beginning” (cf. John 1:1–2) suggests his deity. The fact that he has been seen, heard, and touched shows that he has truly visited his people in bodily form, pointing to the reality of his humanity.

1:2 John breaks his list to make an assertion, the first complete sentence in the letter. “The life” who is also the “eternal life” refers to Jesus, as John says this life “was with the Father.” Thus John is speaking of Jesus as the ultimate life, who is himself the source of eternal life for others (similarly in John 1:4). Jesus was “made manifest” (twice in this verse) or revealed in the incarnation when John, as he says in his Gospel, beheld “his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In addition to continuing the stress on John’s status as eyewitness to this reality (“we have seen it”), verse 2 also notes John’s continuing role of proclaiming this truth to others (“testify . . . and proclaim to you”).

There is a note of grandeur in the last part of this verse: That which was “with the Father” has now been “made manifest to us.” Jesus has come from the Father to us. OT saints knew of the Messiah dimly, but now Jesus has come directly from the Father to us. This is grace incarnate. Familiarity with such verses must not blunt the awe of such reality.

1:3 This long sentence (vv. 1–3) finally comes to its main clause: “we proclaim.” The point of this opening is to ground the authority of John’s preaching: he has preached what he has seen and heard. Those who deny the incarnation deny what they were not there to experience. John asserts himself as a counterwitness to the incarnation-deniers, and a better witness: he was there; they were not.

Furthermore, this verse includes the first purpose statement of the letter: John proclaimed this truth so that his readers “may have fellowship with us,” the apostolic witnesses, who are in fellowship with God. The issue addressed by the letter, as we discover in 2:19, is that a group who deny the incarnation have left the fellowship of the church. John declares his eyewitness authority in order to keep the people in fellowship with him and other orthodox believers because they, not the dissenters, are truly in fellowship with God.

Jesus, who has been referred to throughout these verses, is now named for the first time, climactically, at the end of this verse: the Father’s “Son Jesus Christ.”

1:4 John’s second purpose is directly related to the first. John writes to ensure the joy of his readers and himself.¹⁵ Their joy will be complete if they hold fast to Christ and one another, persevering through this current trial, finding the fulfillment of their faith and thus hearing, on the final day, the invitation to enter into

¹⁵ There is a textual variant in 1:4, with two possible readings: “our [ἡμῶν] joy” or “your [ὑμῶν] joy.” The evidence is fairly balanced between the two, though most translations opt for “our joy.” There is not much difference in meaning. Since John so closely connects his joy with that of his people, and since “our” can include the readers as well as John, I have intertwined the two in my comments.

the joy of their Master (Matt. 25:23). John's joy will be completed as he sees these people whom he loves (e.g., 1 John 2:7; 4:1, 7) persevering in the faith, as he says in 2 John 4 and 3 John 3–4.

Response

John opens this letter with a firm declaration of his authority as an eyewitness of the incarnation (as Paul often did). Despite the fact that some denied the truth of the incarnation (as we discover later), John asserts that he and the apostles know the reality of the resurrection through firsthand experience.

John's audience had experienced a break in fellowship when the incarnation-deniers left. But John tells them that what they need is fellowship with him, because he is in fellowship with the Father and Son. John is saying to this church, "Stay with us. Do not follow those who left." As John will make clear later, break in fellowship is not to be desired. If such a rupture happens, however, John counsels his audience to stay with those connected to the apostolic witness, which is connected to God.

Notice John's two stated pastoral purposes. As just noted, his first purpose is that his readers remain in fellowship with orthodox believers and thus in fellowship with God. In other words, John is pursuing their perseverance. It is true that God preserves his people, but one way he does so is through the teaching, rebuking, and correcting of pastors and other believers. If we turn a deaf ear to such instruction, we ought not expect to persevere (Prov. 19:27). Secondly, John writes to ensure the joy of his people. This also shows us the heart of a true pastor, yearning for and laboring for the perseverance of his people. John "has the heart of a pastor which cannot be completely happy so long as some of those for whom he feels responsible are not experiencing the full blessings of the gospel."¹⁶

1 JOHN 1:5–2:2

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), 105.

2 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. ²He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Section Overview

The first four verses have introduced John's authority concerning Jesus. This section moves more specifically into what Jesus has taught and required of his followers. After the opening statement concerning God's holiness, the remainder of this section is shaped by three "If we say" statements, each with a follow-up statement. "If we say" introduces a false claim, and the following verse provides the contrasting truth:

- If we say . . . (1:6)
- But if we walk . . . (1:7)
- If we say . . . (1:8)
- If we confess . . . (1:9)
- If we say . . . (1:10)
- But if anyone does sin . . . (2:1–2)

Section Outline

- II. The Necessity of Holiness (1:5–2:2)
 - A. God's Utter Holiness (1:5)
 - B. God's People Must Be Holy (1:6–7)
 - C. Holiness Involves Confessing Our Sins (1:8–9)
 - D. We Can Confess because We Have an Advocate (1:10–2:2)

Comment

1:5 The message John and others heard from Jesus centered on holiness. There is a note of authority here once again. This message came from Jesus himself ("we have heard from him") and is now proclaimed by John to his readers. To disregard John's message, then, is to disregard Christ.

"Light" and "darkness," as used here, are moral categories. This usage is found elsewhere in Scripture (Job 18:5–6, 18; 30:26; Isa. 5:20; Luke 11:33–36; Acts 26:18), including in John's Gospel (1:5; 3:19; 12:46). To say that "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" is to say that God is utterly holy.

1:6 This verse draws an inference from the preceding verse. Since God is utterly holy, one cannot be in fellowship with him and also walk in sin ("darkness"). To claim to do so is to lie. The verb "walk" (*peripatedō*) is commonly used to refer to one's lifestyle (e.g., Rom. 14:15; Eph. 5:2). Thus John is not saying that any individual act of sin puts the lie to a claim to know God, but that a lifestyle characterized by ongoing, unrepented sin proves one is not converted.

This understanding is further affirmed by the opposite of walking in sin: practicing the truth. What is expected of believers is the ongoing practice, the living out, of the truth. The use of “practice” here is similar to our use when we say a doctor “practices medicine”—it is his manner of life.

1:7 In contrast to the warning of verse 6, walking in holiness (“the light”) confirms a profession of knowing God. In this case we have fellowship with believers (“one another”) and thus, it is implied, with God (as John said in 1 John 1:3). John once again explicitly roots the call to holiness in the character of God. We should walk in the light because God is in the light (similarly 1 Pet. 1:15–16).

Walking in the light has two consequences. First, as mentioned, we have fellowship with “one another,” i.e., other believers and the apostolic witness. We must not miss how John says that holiness produces fellowship. Legalism and casual acceptance of sin will kill fellowship, but true holiness unites us with fellow believers. The second consequence is that “the blood of Jesus . . . cleanses us from all sin.” This does not mean our holy behavior earns us such cleansing. Rather, walking in the light shows that we are among those who have been cleansed.

The “blood of Jesus” refers to his sacrificial death, using terms in keeping with the OT sacrificial system, which underlies the consistent biblical discussion of Jesus’ work. John stresses the comprehensiveness of this cleansing, noting that believers are cleansed from “all sin.”

1:8 The previous “If we say” comment (v. 6) was an attempt to claim fellowship with God while remaining in sin. Now, in verse 8, we encountered the claim to have no sin to begin with. But, John says, a claim to sinlessness is simply self-deception. Such self-deceived people do not have the truth in them, which means they are not converted. The possibility of self-deception concerning one’s spiritual state is sobering, and the comfort is that the truth, if received, will set us free from such deception.

1:9 The structure noted above (“If we say,” followed by a response) shows that this verse stands in contrast to the preceding one. If, rather than trying to hide or deny our sin, we confess it, we can know cleansing. This is a truth clearly taught in the OT (e.g., Ps. 32:5; Prov. 28:13). The temptation to hide our sins rather than confess them arises from the fear of how the offended person will respond. John assures his readers that God, the one whom ultimately all sin offends, is “faithful and just” (the faithfulness of God is the consistent appeal of Psalm 32).

We might wonder why the faithfulness and justice of God would lead him to forgive our sins, for justice seems to require his punishing our sins. No doubt the broader truth of God’s new covenant with his people established by the work of Christ is in view. Those who repent and believe have been united with God in Christ and have been promised forgiveness of sins and cleansing. Because Christ has taken their punishment and has promised them his righteousness, this forgiveness and cleansing is the just and faithful thing for God to do. We then rest in the covenant promises of God.

1:10 This verse is in many respects a restatement of verse 8. Various suggestions have been made for postulating a difference between the statements in verse 8 and verse 10. It seems best to take this as a summarizing, general statement. The use of the perfect tense could broaden the statement from verse 8, not merely prohibiting the denial of currently having any particular sin but also rebuking the idea of being in a general state of sinlessness. Regardless, the overall point is clear: no Christian should expect sinless perfection in this life.

If we claim sinless perfection, we make God to be a liar, denying his clear statements of humanity's sinfulness and need of redemption. A claim of sinlessness also reveals that God's word is not in us, because the claim is a denial of God's word ("truth" [v. 8] and "his word" [v. 10] are parallel with one another). This is a striking contrast to verse 9, where, by confessing sin, we found God to be faithful and just. By denying our sin we instead make out God to be a liar, untrue to his word.

2:1 This verse begins as a parenthetical statement, as John pauses before responding to the "if" clause (v. 10) as he has done each time previously. This shift is marked by his use of a direct personal address, "my little children." This form of address produces an affectionate earnestness. Having just urged his readers to recognize the reality of their sin, John pauses to make clear that confessing our sin is not the same as condoning it. While hiding the reality of our sin is unwise, he is not calling us to the opposite evil of becoming complacent about it. Instead he pauses to state that his very purpose in writing is to help his readers not to sin. This is the third purpose for writing that John has mentioned (cf. 1:3 and 1:4), and these purposes are directly related. John wants his readers to demonstrate the reality of their conversion, demonstrating that they are in fellowship with God and his apostle, which will involve fighting sin. This will then lead to their collective joy.

Thus John calls for his readers to avoid sin, while also recognizing the reality of sin. The conditional "if anyone does sin" does not suggest it is possible to attain a state of sinlessness this side of heaven. Rather, the Greek construction suggests that the action discussed ("sin") is probable.¹⁷ John writes to help his hearers fight sin, but when they do sin, they must turn to Jesus, their advocate with the Father. This develops what John said in verse 9. The new information concerns the specific role of Jesus in obtaining our forgiveness. In 1:9 the covenant faithfulness of the Father was the basis of our confidence in turning to God in confession; here it is the intercessory work of Christ. He is our "advocate."

The Greek word used here (*paraklētos*) is the same one John uses for the Holy Spirit in his Gospel (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7). In John 14:16 Jesus calls the Holy Spirit "another Helper," implying that he, Jesus, is one as well. This word refers to one who is an "intercessor" or "mediator," one who might help with a legal issue or gain access for another to a prominent person. John reminds his readers that Jesus is this "advocate" for us to the Father when we sin. If this letter is any indication, John's preaching had already made clear to his readers that sin separates us from

17 Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 696–698.

God and incurs his holy wrath. Thus, when we sin, we might be driven to despair. But, John says, while sin is heinous, we have an intercessor to help us deal with this fact and to keep us close to God. This intercessor is further described as “righteous,” as the Father was described in 1:9. Because he is righteous, he can be trusted and can stand before the Father even though we, in our lack of righteousness, cannot. How this advocate deals with our sin is treated in the next verse.

2:2 Jesus can help us with our sin because he is “the propitiation for our sins.” The word “propitiation” (*hilasmos*) refers to a sacrifice that turns away wrath.¹⁸ The reason Jesus can be our advocate despite our sin is that he has borne, on the cross, the punishment required for the sins of all who believe. Since he took that punishment, meaning that our sins have been judged, he has turned away the wrath we deserve so that we can now be reconciled to God (cf. Romans 3). This “sin-bearer” now stands as our advocate, and so we can turn to him.

John goes on to say that Jesus dealt with not only “our sins” but also the sins of “the whole world.” Some have suggested this means that all people will be saved whether or not they repent of their sins and trust Jesus. However, the burden of this letter is to discern true believers from false ones. John’s letter would be pointless if all are redeemed anyway. John has declared various groups of people to be out of fellowship with God, not recipients of the propitiating work of Christ. He is, then, not contradicting himself here. The point, rather, is that Jesus is the one sacrifice available for the world. The message of this salvation is not to be restricted to one group but is to be proclaimed boldly to all people everywhere.

Response

This is a powerful and important text as we deal with the reality of sin in the life of a Christian. Any discussion of this topic must begin, as John does, with the bedrock truth of God’s utter holiness. Without this we will tend to downplay or excuse our sinfulness for various reasons. I have had countless pastoral discussions that ended up with the person saying, in essence, “If you just knew how difficult this is, you would understand that my sin must be excused. God wants me to be happy, and this difficult marriage makes me unhappy, so I must be allowed to walk away.” Or, “I am attracted to people of the same sex, and since I am lonely I must be allowed to marry someone of the same sex.” The examples abound. We must begin with the absolute holiness of God so that we are reminded that the standards of holiness do not depend on our whims.

John, then, is an example of a wise pastor guiding us through the possible dangers of responding to our sin. We tend, on the one hand, to excuse or hide our sin or, on the other, to be crushed by despair over the reality of our sin—and the enemy of our souls does not care which snare catches us. He deploys both stratagems readily and cunningly. John refutes all claims to sinless perfection this side

¹⁸ For the debate over whether this word should be translated “propitiation” or “expiation,” cf. Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 77–79.

of heaven. He pokes a hole in all of our puffed up pretension. For all of us, sin is not merely a past memory but also a present reality. We must face it. But when we face it, we can be overwhelmed. We must face it and then run to Jesus. We must take sin seriously, and we must also take God's forgiveness seriously.

The best way to fight sin is to confess it. It often feels like admitting our sin would lead to taking it lightly ("Oh, it's okay. We all do it") and that it would be better to conceal our sin ("I would never do that"). But this is not the way. We find cleansing by confessing. This faithful cleansing produces gratitude in the forgiven. Since, as Jesus taught, he who is forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:41–47), this confession leads us to greater love for Jesus, and such love is a greater deterrent to sin than fear of exposure is.

It is also interesting to note how John contrasts things we might say ("If we say . . ." 1 John 1:6, 8, 10) with God's truth. People make all sorts of claims and sometimes will allow no disagreement. But God's Word determines truth despite our claims.

1 JOHN 2:3–6

³And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, ⁵but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: ⁶whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

Section Overview

John continues to discuss the holiness of true believers, now in terms of obedience to Christ's "commands" (using for the first time a key term in this letter). Obedience to God's commands is a clear evidence of conversion. John continues to refute false claims, though the language shifts from "if we say" to "whoever says" (1 John 2:4, 6). The flow of thought is a simple back-and-forth between positive and negative assessments of persons' spiritual condition based on their obedience (vv. 3, 5–6) or disobedience (v. 4). Verses 5b–6 restate a positive assessment as a summary of the section.

Section Outline

III. The Necessity of Obedience (2:3–6)

Comment

2:3 With slightly different language John continues to discuss evidence of true conversion. In the previous section, believers were designated as those in whom

resides “the truth” (1:8) or God’s “word” (1:10). Now true believers are described as those who “have come to know him” (the first occurrence of “knowing God” language, which continues throughout the letter). To “know” God is a fairly common biblical term for being in covenant relationship with him (e.g., Jer. 9:24; John 17:3; Titus 1:16).

In this and subsequent verses John refers to “keeping” God’s commands. This Greek verb (*tēreō*) refers to maintaining or guarding and thus, in this context, obeying. Obedience to God’s commands is the indicator that those in question have entered a relationship with God. This is a variation on the basic point made in 1:7: knowing God results in obedience to God. It may be a halting, stumbling obedience, but such a relationship always results in a move toward obedience to God’s commands.

2:4 In light of the statement in verse 3, any claim to know God that is not followed by obedience to him is a lie. This is a variation of the truth expressed in 1:6. In 1:10 the person who claimed to have no sin made God a liar, but here the person who claims to know God, but does not in fact obey him, is himself a liar; that is, “the truth is not in him.” True faith always produces obedience.

2:5a The first part of verse 5 continues the sentence from verse 4, stating the inverse truth. As disobedience disproves a claim to know God, so obedience substantiates such a claim. Here God’s “word” replaces his “command” as a synonym, and the reality of knowing God is stated as the love of God being perfected in that person. This is the first reference to the love of God, which will later become a key theme.

The “love of God” could be understood in various ways. It seems most likely in this context that John is referring to the love believers have for God. Our love for God comes to its proper completion as it results in obedience to God (which will also result in love for others, as John will say in the following verses). This connection between love for God and obedience is a common theme throughout John’s writing (John 14:15, 21, 23; 2 John 6).

2:5b–6 “By this we may know” restates the phrase that opened this section in verse 3, indicating that John is concluding this subsection and summarizing the emphasis on obedience as proof of conversion. If anyone truly abides in Christ, he will live as Christ lived. This is a descriptive way of saying that true believers will obey Christ, for this is what it means to be a disciple: to follow the ways, imitate the behavior, and adhere to the teachings of a specific master. Thus a claim to be a disciple of Christ while not seeking to follow his ways is patently false.

Response

Obedience is nonnegotiable in the Christian life. The reality of salvation by grace alone does not negate the necessity of obedience, as John (and Paul) makes abundantly clear. The order is what is crucial. John does not say, “Obey in order to be forgiven.” Rather, he says repeatedly that anyone who is truly in Christ will obey

him. John's concern is for his readers to recognize the telltale signs of one who knows God. If someone shows no concern to submit to God's commands, even—indeed especially—when these commands cut across our cultural ideas or our comfort, we must question the spiritual state of that person.

1 JOHN 2:7–11

⁷Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because¹ the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

⁹Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.

¹⁰Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him² there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

¹Or *that* ²Or *it*

Section Overview

John continues the theme of obedience, shifting to the command to love one another. One key way Christians obey God is by loving one another. A lack of love for fellow believers is evidence that one does not know God.

Section Outline

- IV. The Necessity of Loving Fellow Christians (2:7–11)
 - A. The Old Yet New Command (2:7–8)
 - B. Love and Light, Hate and Darkness (2:9–11)

Comment

2:7 John addresses his readers as “beloved” for the first time, and will do so regularly throughout the rest of the letter. This is no mere convention. Having just mentioned the love of God being perfected in them (2:5), and preparing to call them to love one another, John uses a term of endearment for them that refers to the fact that they are loved by John and by God.

The “commandment” discussed here and in the following verses is the command to love one another. John says this is nothing new to them but is something they “had from the beginning” and “have heard.” Undoubtedly this refers to the fact that from the beginning of their Christian life, from the earliest times they

heard the gospel proclaimed, they had been taught that Christians are to love one another—quite possibly as they heard John relate the words of Jesus that the apostle recorded in John 13:34–35. “Beginning” could also refer to the beginning of Scripture, as this command is also recorded in the earliest revelation, the Pentateuch (e.g., Lev. 19:18).

2:8 In another sense, this “commandment” is now “new” in light of Christ’s resurrection and ascension. The “darkness . . . passing away” and the “true light . . . already shining” refers to the breaking in of the kingdom of God. The darkness is not completely gone, but now because of Christ’s decisive victory the new era has begun. Thus this commandment is more than what could have been stated by Moses or even understood by the hearers of Jesus previously. In light of Christ’s ultimate fulfillment of this command with his self-sacrifice at the cross and his resulting powerful presence before the Father (John 16:10, 28) and his mediatorial role (1 John 2:1), this command has new power and possibility of fulfillment among his people.

2:9 John continues with the light/darkness theme reintroduced in the previous verse, noting ethical implications in another “whoever says” statement. Anyone who claims to partake in this in-breaking kingdom of God (“the light”) but “hates his brother” does not know what he is talking about. Hatred of a fellow believer (“brother”) has no place in this kingdom of light, so such hatred is another refutation of a claim to know God.

2:10 The one who obeys this renewed love command is “in the light,” participating in the in-breaking kingdom of God. He partakes of the benefits of Christ’s victory. As a result, there is in such a one “no cause for stumbling” (Gk. *skandalon*, which in the NT almost always refers to that which causes another person to stumble). Thus, when we love other believers, we “promote rather than deter the kingdom progress of others.”¹⁹

2:11 John returns to the condition of the one who hates another believer, repeating that such a person is in darkness (outside of God’s kingdom; cf. v. 9). John adds that such a hater “walks in the darkness,” stressing his ongoing life outside of God’s ways, with the result that such a person is lost and aimless (“does not know where he is going”). Furthermore, the one who hates his brother is “blinded.” Sin blinds us to theological and ethical truth, putting us in a condition where we cannot see the truth even when it stands before our very eyes. Jesus rebuked such blindness among religious leaders (John 9:35–41), and Paul describes it as well (2 Cor. 4:4).

Response

Love for fellow believers is a nonnegotiable part of the Christian faith. If someone professes faith but does not love his fellow believers, such a person has not

¹⁹ Ibid., 109.

been truly converted. Love may be stronger or weaker, more or less consistent, but if conversion has occurred, it will be present. At this point in redemptive history, as Christ has accomplished his work on the cross, has poured his Spirit upon us, and continues to make intercession for us, a lack of love among believers is particularly inexcusable. If anyone seeks to justify hatred toward other believers, it is clear that such a one is blinded, unable to see the clear truth of this text.

Since darkness does indeed blind people, we must remember that mere rational explanation will not be adequate to bring others to Christ; the work of the Holy Spirit is necessary. Our duty is to speak the gospel, but only God can open blind eyes.

John's use of "beloved" is instructive. Although "dearly beloved" has for many become an overused, archaic-sounding convention, we must not lose the pastoral import of addressing the people of God in ways that regularly affirm our love and God's love for them. Pastors, particularly, can learn from John's example by addressing their people in ways that make clear their affection for them, even when challenging or rebuking them.

1 JOHN 2:12–14

- ¹² I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.
- ¹³ I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.
I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.
- ¹⁴ I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.
I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

Section Overview

This passage presents a tangled web of difficulties for explaining exactly who and what is in view. What is the difference between "I am writing" (present tense verb, three times) and "I write" (aorist tense verb, three times)? Who are the "children," "fathers," and "young men"—are these three separate groups, or do they overlap

in some way? And what is the point of the message to each group? It may help to place the parallel portions side-by-side, as in table 5.1. Identical language is in bold.

TABLE 5.1: The Parallel Portions of 1 John 2:12–14

(12) I am writing to you , little children [Gk. <i>teknia</i>], because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.	(13, continued) I write to you , children [Gk. <i>paidia</i>], because you know the Father.
(13) I am writing to you , fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning	(14) I write to you , fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning .
I am writing to you , young men, because you have overcome the evil one.	I write to you , young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

The comments to each group concern gospel benefits mentioned elsewhere in the letter: forgiveness of sins (1:9), knowing God (2:3), overcoming the Evil One (4:4 [addressed specifically to *teknia*]; 5:4–5), the word of God abiding (1:8, 10; 2:24). The only one missing from the rest of the letter in explicit terms is the comment to the young men about being strong.

The repetition of “I am writing” and “I write” is rhetorical, functioning as a call to renewed focus. John has already mentioned reasons for his writing (1:4; 2:1), but having gotten well into his message addressing holiness and love for fellow believers, John pauses to ensure that he has their attention. It is as if John, as a good preacher, pauses at a key moment and says, “Listen to me!”

Given the parallelism, it is unlikely that any distinction is intended between “little children” (v. 12, *teknia*) and “children” (v. 13, *paidia*). *Teknia* occurs only in John’s writings in the NT and always seems to serve as a term of endearment—it is an emotionally evocative term, demonstrating love and fatherly concern.²⁰ Furthermore, since throughout this letter John refers to his audience as a whole with both of these terms (*teknia*, 2:12, 28; 3:18; 4:4; 5:21; *paidia*, 2:18; 3:7), it is unlikely that in these verses he uses the terms to refer to simply one part of his audience. Therefore, by “children” or “little children” John refers to the whole church.

John then refers to the believers in two categories using encouraging terms. “Father” was a term of respect in the ancient world that evoked the responsibility to care for, lead, and be an example for others. Thus John is appealing here to those with some level of maturity within the church. Those who do not yet have the maturity (younger in age or in the faith) are addressed as “young men” (*neaniskoi*), a term often connected with a stage of particular strength, vitality, and potential. In the LXX this word is used for the men who went into Jericho

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 116, for further evidence for this point.

as spies (Josh. 6:23) and for Daniel and his three friends, who remained faithful to God in exile (Dan. 1:17). Thus John refers to this group in terms of their potential and promise.

As mentioned above, each of the “because” clauses refers to gospel benefits mentioned elsewhere in the letter. John is saying, in essence, “I am writing to you because you believe the gospel and have held fast to it in spite of the false teachers who have left the church” (cf. 2:19). At this point in the letter he pauses to remind them of powerful gospel benefits in order to encourage them in their continued perseverance.

Section Outline

V. Gospel Encouragements (2:12–14)

Comment

2:12 John opens this rhetorical section by reminding his hearers that their sins have been forgiven. Effectively restating the point of 1:9 and 2:1 shows the importance of this point to the argument of the letter. John seeks the joy of his hearers (1:4) by giving them a solid basis for recognizing true faith (in distinction from the false teachers) and by reminding them that because they hold fast to the gospel, they can be assured that their sins are forgiven. “For his name’s sake” makes explicit that forgiveness comes because of Christ and his work.

2:13 The more mature among the congregation are reminded that they know God, the one “who is from the beginning,” the same one John has seen with his own eyes (1:1). By holding fast to the message John preached, they have continued in knowledge of the true God whom John preached.

The younger in the faith are reminded that they have conquered the Devil, a truth John will further expound later in the letter. Presumably one key way they have overcome this enemy is by withstanding the wooing of the false teachers.

The entire congregation is reminded that they all “know the Father,” that is, they have fellowship with him (1:3). As John will say later, they have remained in the Father by resisting the teaching of those who denied the Father (2:22–24).

2:14 The statement to the more mature is repeated from 2:13, providing emphasis. John adds two points to his comments to the younger ones among the congregation. Because the Word of God abides in them (cf. 2:24), they are strong and have thus overcome the Evil One. This group may not have the maturity of the “fathers,” but because the Word of God abides in them they can be confident that the strength of God is at work in them.

Response

John provides a valuable pastoral example in this section. He has not dodged the challenging truths that needed to be stated in the previous sections. He has been

bold and direct. But he is not shrill, and he does not stay in confrontation mode. Here he pauses to encourage his people with the reality of gospel promises. These truths—and not browbeating—are what will inspire them to persevere and to pursue holiness.

1 JOHN 2:15–17

¹⁵Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life¹—is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

¹Or *pride in possessions*

Section Overview

Verses 7–11 of 1 John 2 discussed who must be loved: fellow believers. After the dramatic pause and refocusing of attention (2:12–14), John now highlights what must *not* be loved: the world. If anyone does not love believers, he is in darkness and is blinded. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Section Outline

- VI. The Snare of Loving the World (2:15–17)
 - A. Do Not Love the World (2:15)
 - B. Reasons Not to Love the World (2:16–17)
 - 1. The World Is Not of God (2:16)
 - 2. The World Is Passing Away (2:17)

Comment

2:15 This first imperative of the letter can be misunderstood if we fail to identify the “world” properly. “Things in the world” does not refer to creation; this is not a dualist call to be concerned only with spiritual rather than physical things. John can use “world” (*kosmos*) more positively, such as in God’s love for the world (John 3:16), Jesus as the propitiation for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2), or Jesus as the Savior of the world (1 John 4:14). In these instances mankind, the inhabitants of the world, is in view. They are opposed to God, but God still loves humanity and comes to redeem it. Quite often, however, the “world” is the realm, even the system, of rebellion against God (4:4–5). It does not know God or believers (3:1) and indeed hates believers (3:13). It is the realm of false prophets and the antichrist (4:1, 3),

for “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (5:19). Into this realm of hostility Jesus came (4:17) in order to be the Savior, to redeem people out of this realm, allowing us to overcome the world (5:4–5).²¹

Thus John is not forbidding appreciation of creation or love for people. Rather he is warning against setting one’s affections on sin or behaviors inimical to God and his character. John “counsels strategic disavowals of loyalties to features of the world that would surely compromise the total devotion that is appropriate to God alone.”²²

This point is made even clearer in the second half of the verse, which contrasts love of the world with love of the Father. John directs his readers toward the proper object of their affections by holding up contrasting objects. One cannot love the world and love the Father at the same time, for the world is at odds with the Father. One must choose. One must take a side. And because of who God is, proper love for him can brook no rivals. True love for God must place him supreme in one’s affections.

2:16 The problem with “the things in the world” mentioned in 2:15 is, first of all, that they are not “from the Father,” that is, they are not rooted in him. They arise instead from that which is in opposition to God. “John is thinking of things that can be regarded as detrimental because they lack sanctifying ties with the Father.”²³ Obviously, people who love God ought not be attracted to things that arise from opposition to God and thus to them. John is saying, in part, “Do not love the sin that seeks to destroy you.”

The rivals in view here are heart dispositions. “Desire” (*epithymia*) is not always negative, but here it clearly is.²⁴ “Desires of the flesh” refers to those desires that arise from fallen humanity apart from the influence of God’s sanctifying work, including a broad range of sinful desires such as lust, gluttony, and the pursuit of various other addictions.

The second element of things of the world, “the desires of the eyes,” is not an entirely separate category but can be seen as another aspect of the desires of the flesh. Our eyes are, of course, wonderful gifts, but once again John has in view the sinful use of these gifts. Jesus spoke of the eyes as the “lamp of the body,” with potential either for good or for causing the “whole body” to be “full of darkness” (Matt. 6:22–23). In the first sin, Eve was taken in as she noticed that the forbidden fruit was a “delight to the eyes” (Gen. 3:6). Thus “desires of the eyes” refers to being captivated via sight by desire for forbidden things. C. H. Dodd suggests this refers to “the tendency to be captivated by the outward show of things, without enquiring into their real values.”²⁵ This would then refer to the tendency to chase what “looks good” without concern for whether or not it is pleasing to God.

21 Cf. further the chapter on “The World,” in Paul Rainbow, *Johannine Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 115–145.

22 Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 128.

23 *Ibid.*, 131.

24 Peter also contrasts wrong human desires (*epithymia*) with God’s will, that which God desires (*thelēma*) (1 Pet. 4:2).

25 Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 41. Cf. also Daniel Akin 1, 2, 3 *John*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 110.

The last item in the list is the “pride of life.” This phrase is vaguer than the others. The word for “pride” (*alazoneia*) typically refers to arrogant boasting, while the word for “life” (*bios*) often refers to material goods, or that which one has to live on (e.g., Luke 15:12, 30; 21:4), which is precisely the meaning of the word when it occurs later in this letter, in 1 John 3:17. Thus what is in view here is not pride generally but the vaunted sense of self-importance derived from one’s possessions, position, or prestige.

These three things “in the world” characterize what is at work in the world system in opposition to God. They are not passive, but aggressively seek to allure the affections of everyone including Christians. Thus, John warns his hearers not to love these things.

2:17 Not only are the “world” and its “things” opposed to God, but they are also “passing away.” They will not endure and thus are not suitable objects for our affections. Nor do they provide a stable basis for life. In contrast, those who do the will of God “[abide] forever.” John’s point is exhortatory: we ought not set our hearts on these sinful desires that will fade and fall away, for they will finally disappoint. Obedience to God, however, will lead to lasting joy. If, then, we love life and long for fulfillment, we must resist the allure of sinful desires and obey God instead.

Response

Contrary to much of popular culture, John realizes that love, in and of itself, is not the answer. It matters what we love. Some love is sinful. We must love God, his Word, and his people, but we must not love selfishness and sin.

Some have wreaked havoc with 2:15, seeing there a pleasure-hating asceticism or a curmudgeonly skepticism toward beauty, enjoyment, or people. None of this is called for here. It is clear that there is a common way of life that is opposed to the things of God, a way that seems to help one get ahead but is actually opposed to God. This is what John is telling us not to love. He is not telling us to hate God’s creation or the good gifts he has given to us as part of that creation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer ministered in the shadow of the Nazi machine, where friendship with the world captivated many believers, as it seemed to promise safety. He captured the essence of our text when he wrote,

In obedience and faith alone the church took up the struggle ordained for her. From the Word alone she may be led. For her Lord she gladly gave up all cares, all security, all friendship with the world. Yes, our way leads also through distress, but the Lord bound us not to yield. Do we want to yield today for the sake of friendship with the world, do we want to sell our calling for the mess of pottage of a safe future? Through our own behavior we are making the Gospel of our church unworthy of belief!²⁶

²⁶ Bonhoeffer, quoted in Rudolf Wentorf, *Paul Schneider: The Witness of Buchenwald*, trans. Franklin Sanders (Las Vegas: Geodesics, 1986), 68.

1 JOHN 2:18–27

¹⁸Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.¹ ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. ²²Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is the promise that he made to us²—eternal life.

²⁶I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. ²⁷But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him.

¹ Some manuscripts *you know everything* ² Some manuscripts *you*

Section Overview

The vocative (“Children”) signals the opening of a new section. This new section addresses “antichrist” (2:18 [2x], 22), those who are “trying to deceive” John’s audience (2:26). We now discover the cause for this letter—a group has left the church and instead has followed a new, distorted teaching concerning the identity of Jesus. This schism has raised questions concerning how we may know if someone is truly a believer. Having addressed some of the attendant issues (holiness, and love of fellow believers), John now focuses on the doctrinal issue at the center of the trouble.

Section Outline

- VII. The Necessity of Discernment (2:18–27)
 - A. The Reality of Antichrist (2:18)
 - B. Apostasy (2:19)
 - C. Affirmation of the Faithful (2:20–21)
 - D. Antichrist Denies the Son (2:22–23)
 - E. Call to Abide (2:24–27)

Comment

2:18 The use of “children” once again highlights the familial setting and paternal affection of John, as he turns to address more directly the painful circumstance that has occasioned this letter. With his typical manner of interweaving repetition, John states that the appearance of “many antichrists” proves that the “last hour” has come. John’s reference to “antichrist” is the earliest preserved use of this term in Christian writing. Paul refers to a later-day figure who opposes God and his people (“the man of lawlessness”; 2 Thess. 2:3), and John may refer to the same figure here. John’s audience has already been taught that such a one will appear. The concern at the moment, however, is that many opponents of Christ—those who by teaching wrongly about the person of Christ are therefore anti-Christ—are currently on the scene. John’s concern is pastoral and present, not merely predictive.

Warnings that false teachers would come is standard apostolic teaching (Paul: Acts 20:29–30; Peter: 2 Pet. 2:1–3), especially with regard to these teachers’ arrival in the “last days” (2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3). However, readers often misunderstand these references to the “last days” or “last hour.” In NT terms the world entered the “last days” or “last hour” after the resurrection and ascension of Christ (Acts 2:17; Heb. 1:2; cf. also 1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 9:26; 1 Pet. 4:7). John’s point is that his readers knew these false teachers were coming. This is nothing surprising, even if the impact (some of their number turning away) has shaken them.

2:19 Some who were members of this fellowship (whether false teachers or those influenced by them) “went out from us.” In order to follow the new, aberrant teaching, these people abandoned the Christian community, which held fast to the apostolic teaching. In a theologically loaded and pastorally crucial comment, John says that the abandoning of the church by these individuals proves that they were never truly a part of it. That is, while they had joined the congregation and engaged with it, they were never truly converted. In traditional theological terms, they joined the “visible church” but were never part of the “invisible church.”

How does John know this? Because if they had truly been “of us,” truly converted, they would have “continued with us.” True converts persevere in the faith and remain in vital connection with the faithful church. The departure of these people, John says, makes clear that they were never truly converted.

2:20 Having stated the awful truth that these individuals—known and no doubt loved by those hearing this letter—are outside the faith and thus under the wrath of God, John then reassures the faithful. He encourages them by stating that they “have been anointed” and have “knowledge.” Anointing in the OT was a mark of being chosen by God and set apart for a task. Here John means ultimately that they have been converted, that God has marked them off for himself. More directly, it may refer to the apostolic teaching they have received or to the Holy Spirit’s regenerating them prior to conversion. Such apostolic teaching has been in view throughout this letter, and it is this teaching that gives them “knowledge.” While

the Holy Spirit has not been explicitly mentioned, he is often associated with anointing (1 Sam. 16:13; Isa. 61:1; Acts 10:38)²⁷ and in John's Gospel is specifically the one who will lead believers into all truth (John 16:13). As Calvin said, "Men are not rightly made wise by the acumen of their own minds, but by the illumination of the Spirit."²⁸ In any case, Spirit and truth are joined closely throughout Scripture.

This anointing comes from "the Holy One," meaning God (whether specifically Father or Son is not made explicit). The use of this phrase connects to John's earlier teaching regarding holiness. In contrast to those who have turned away and abandoned holiness, the faithful are marked by the Holy One "in such a way that the departure of some need not demoralize those who are still standing fast."²⁹

Because of this anointing, believers "all"—every one of us—"have knowledge." In contrast to those who have turned away, true believers know the truth, the apostolic teaching, the gospel.

2:21 John is encouraging his hearers who have been shaken by the apostasy of those they had considered brothers. So he tells them he is not writing because they failed to know or remember the truth. Rather, he is writing because they *have* faithfully maintained the truth amid difficulty. This truth, which they know and have held to, has no place for lies.

2:22 John expounds the "lie" he had in mind in verse 21: it is the claim that Jesus is not the Christ. John goes on to describe this denial as a denial of the Son, and thus of the Father. John thus connects the messiahship of Jesus with his status as divine Son of God. The true identity of Jesus is a central part of the truth believers know, and to deny this truth is to lie. To assert this lie is to be "antichrist," since to do so is a denial of Christ. As Yarbrough aptly states, this is the anticonfession of the antichrist.³⁰ Contrary to postmodern sensibilities, John asserts that this religious idea is no mere personal opinion. It is true for all people at all times.

2:23 If one does not accept the Son, then, despite claims otherwise, he does not know the Father, since the Father and the Son are one. Positively, then, if one confesses the Son, he will have the Father also. There is no way to know Yahweh apart from Jesus.

2:24 In light of the seriousness of what is at stake, John urges his readers to remain in the apostolic teaching they have heard rather than moving on to something new, like the apostates have done (cf. similar language in 2:14). Abiding or remaining in this truth ensures that they will remain in God, Father and Son. The key to perseverance here is holding fast to proper doctrine.

2:25 Though not explicitly stated, the point of this verse is that God has promised eternal life to those who abide in the Son and in the Father (cf. v. 24). As John has

²⁷ This seems to be what is pictured at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:32–34).

²⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 194.

²⁹ Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 151.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

made clear previously, what is at stake is the eternal destiny of those who have turned away.³¹

2:26 John restates that his warnings and instructions are given because of those who are seeking to lead his readers away to error. As a good pastor, John exposes error and urges perseverance in order to defend his flock from deception.

2:27 John returns to the “anointing” he first mentioned in 2:20. As noted in the comment on that verse, this could refer to the apostolic teaching or to the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the two are closely related (the apostolic teaching is inspired by and confirmed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit). This anointing abides in John’s readers and teaches them, just as John has been urging them to let what they have heard abide in them (v. 24). This gospel truth will continue to instruct and guide them, calling them to abide in God and not to chase after error.

Much mischief has been made with John’s statement that his readers “have no need” for anyone to teach them. He is not rejecting any place for human teachers; to do so would be to undercut the very letter he is writing! Furthermore, this would fly in the face of consistent biblical witness concerning the need for teachers. Rather, he is saying that they do not need anyone to lay again the basic foundation of their faith. They have that foundation in the teaching with which John instructed them, and that truth will guide them. In a direct pastoral appeal, John assures them that they are not without knowledge (cf. 2:20), so they need not let someone come in and tell them to “start all over again.” Rather, they certainly have enough truth to discern the error of these false teachers and to recognize their need to abide in God—Father and Son.

Response

Often too much energy is given to speculation about a future “antichrist” rather than dealing with current antichrists afflicting the church and turning people away to their damnation. We need, like John here, to be more concerned with protecting the flock than with predicting the future.

First John 2:19 is an important text when dealing with those who have professed faith but later turn away and deny it. Christians debate exactly how to understand this theologically, but John seems to make clear that such people, although they appeared to us to have been converted, never were truly believers (“if they had been of us, they would have continued with us”). This is a key verse for understanding the importance of church membership, by which we help one another persevere; abandoning the church demonstrates a lack of true spiritual life.

Once again, John is a model for pastors. While exposing error, he is careful to encourage those who have held on. It is too easy for our zeal for truth to crush tender souls without our intending to do so. “Dominical and apostolic authority

³¹ The textual variant here, “us” versus “you” (ESV mg.), matters little for the meaning of this verse. The promise is made to all Christians (“us”), though John could directly focus on his hearers (“you”) without excluding himself.

are effective when administered with a shepherd's care rather than a tyrant's force," as Yarbrough points out.³²

Verses 22–23 hold important and grave implications for interaction with other world religions. No one truly knows or worships Yahweh if he denies the Son. That is, if one does not accept Jesus as Messiah and divine Son, such a person does not worship Yahweh. Thus Jews and Muslims do not worship the same God as Christians. Of course Jews use the same name for God as believers do, but they use the proper name for a wrong conception of him.

1 JOHN 2:28–3:10

²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.

²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

3 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears¹ we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's² seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

¹ Or *when it appears* ² Greek *his*

Section Overview

The direct address ("little children") again signals a new section. John continues the theme of abiding, addressing the idea of being God's children and the holiness required as such. Having directly addressed false teaching in the previous section,

³² Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 152.

John returns to the need for holiness, now connected to the reality of Christ's return and the effect of being made children of God.

This unit includes two subsections, 1 John 2:28–3:3 and 3:4–10. The first subsection addresses our status as God's children as the center of our hope on the day of Christ's coming, while the second turns more directly to the theme of righteous living in light of that status as God's children, eagerly anticipating Christ's return (3:3). The two subsections are held together by the theme of being born of God, which occurs in 2:29; 3:1; 3:9; and 3:10.

Section Outline

- VIII. Confidence as God's Children at Christ's Return (2:28–3:10)
 - A. Abiding and Righteous Living as Preparation for Christ's Return (2:28–3:3)
 - B. Righteous Living as a Consequence of Being God's Children (3:4–10)

Comment

2:28 John again uses the term of endearment “little children” (*teknia*). Having just stated that their anointing teaches his readers to abide in God, he now directly urges them to do just this. The new idea here is “his coming.” Because living in light of Christ's return was basic Christian teaching that his readers had already received, John does not pause to explain it. Instead he focuses on two starkly different responses to Christ's return. Those who are faithful and remain in God will have “confidence,” while those who do not remain but move on to other (false) teaching will “shrink from him in shame.” John is continuing to call his readers to perseverance, now in light of Christ's return: “His return is sure. You will stand before him. The only question is, what will that be like for you?”

2:29 John now states how one can have confidence at Christ's return: by demonstrating one's spiritual birth through righteous living. Those who will be confident will be those who know they are God's children, marked by the family trait of righteousness. Once again John roots holy living in the character of God (cf. 1:5–6; 2:5–6).

3:1 Reference to being born of God spurs John to marvel at the privilege of being God's children. “See” (“Behold!”) is an exclamation of wonder and amazement. John is enraptured with the reality of being adopted by God. For God to stay his hand of judgment, to forgive and redeem rebellious sinners like us, would have been, in and of itself, a remarkable display of divine love, but our Lord went even further and made us his children! We dare not pass quickly over this point; we must ponder it until we share the awe and wonder of the apostle at this truth. J. I. Packer is right in saying that knowing God as one's holy Father sums up “New Testament religion” and that one can tell how well he understands Christianity by seeing how much he makes of being a child of God. “If this is not the thought

that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.”³³

John’s amazement also serves to urge perseverance. The truth in which his hearers abide provides for them the unimaginable privilege of being God’s children. Who would turn their back on this for some other message? (The book of Hebrews makes a similar argument.) In fact, being God’s children is not only an immense privilege; it also explains our conflict with the world. The world does not know us, it does not recognize or appreciate us, because “it did not know him.” It should be no surprise that a world that rejected Christ should reject his followers. This is a far cry from prosperity theology. The “world” here no doubt includes particularly the false teachers.

3:2 By referring to his hearers as “beloved,” John not only uses another term of endearment but also recaps the previous verse. They are beloved as objects of John’s love, but even more so as objects of God’s amazing love, which has just been described and is now described again as John says again that they are “God’s children now.” John also returns to the idea of Christ’s coming. We do not know, John says, exactly what we will be like at his return, but we do know that “we shall be like him”—that is, like him in holiness. We are to live righteously now (2:29), even though we will not attain complete righteousness until Jesus comes. At that point we will be purified, “because we shall see him as he is.” This is what theologians have called the “beatific vision” or the “blessed vision”: seeing Christ in his fullness and being purified as a result.

3:3 Anyone who sets his heart on future purification will pursue present purification. It is interesting to note John’s language concerning the believer’s hope. True believers set their hope in Christ for future vindication and sanctification. The Christian life cannot be lived with eyes set only on the current situation. Thus the NT consistently grounds present perseverance in eschatological hope (e.g., Titus 2:12–13). Faith in the future grounds perseverance in the present.

This returns to John’s continuing concern for holiness. Those who do not pursue holiness show that they do not know God, for they neither reflect his character nor live in light of his return.

3:4 Now John moves directly to the problem of continuing in sin. Having substantiated the need for holiness, he turns to the lack of it. The ESV appropriately translates the underlying Greek as “makes a practice of sinning” and “practices lawlessness.” The Greek phrase combines a verb meaning “do” or “practice” (*poieō*) with the nouns for sin and lawlessness. This wording emphasizes the ongoing practice (as Daniel Akin says, “willful, habitual action”³⁴) that is in view. John is referring not to occasional acts but to a lifestyle, as he continues to do throughout this section.

³³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 182.

³⁴ Akin, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 140.

John connects “sin” and “lawlessness.” “Lawlessness” is commonly used in the Bible for particularly heinous sin.³⁵ It suggests a disregard for God’s ways. To make a habit of sinning is to live in complete rebellion against God. Such sin cannot be treated lightly.

3:5 John appeals again to the truth his readers already know. They know that one purpose of the incarnation was for Jesus to remove (“take away”) sins. If Jesus came to get rid of sin, how can his people live in it? It is impossible to walk with Jesus while supporting what he came to destroy. Furthermore, there is no sin in Jesus, so his people should give no place to it either.

3:6 Abiding in or knowing God is contradictory to sinning. This is central to John’s message concerning holiness. The holy God is opposed to sin, so his people cannot cozy up to it. The ESV appropriately translates “keeps on sinning” because the present tense verb here, along with the context, makes clear that John is not saying that once a person is converted he no longer commits any sin. Such an idea would contradict 1:8–10. Rather, John is saying that while a believer will continue to struggle with sin, he has made a decisive break with it. Specific sins will still show up in the snapshots of his life, but the video of his life can no longer be titled “Sin.”

3:7–8a A strong warning is introduced by John’s most tender term of endearment. It is his affection for his “little children” that drives his urging. His warning against deception (setting up vv. 7–8a) suggests that he seeks to counter the false teachers. We must not allow any amount of clever talk to distract us from the plain truth: righteousness arises from connection to God, while sin arises from connection to the Devil. Thus a life marked by righteous behavior is evidence of knowing God, while a life characterized by sin is evidence of not knowing God and of being in the clutches of the Devil (note that John, like the rest of the Bible, sees only two possible categories here). In fact, sin is not merely connected with the Devil but originates *from* him, for he was sinning from the “beginning,” from the earliest records we have of the Devil. Sin itself began with his rebellion.

3:8b One key purpose of Christ’s coming was to destroy the Devil’s works, his sin and rebellion into which he seduces people. On the one hand, this verse functions as another statement as to why God’s people are not to take part in sin. Additionally, it is an encouraging statement. Although sin and deception have brought heartache and trouble on the church and thus may seem quite strong, John reminds his readers that Jesus has come to destroy all of Satan’s works. He may yet cause further destruction, but, in Luther’s words, “lo, his doom is sure.”

3:9 The two halves of this verse state the same point in slightly different ways. One who is born of God does not make a practice of sinning (v. 9a) and indeed cannot (v. 9b). The reason in both cases is related to being born of God. Verse 9a states this

³⁵ Cf. Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 181–182, for examples and further evidence.

in terms of God's "seed" (*sperma*), while the second half states it more literally. The term "seed" (or "offspring") was used to refer to descendants (note how Paul uses "offspring" and "children" almost interchangeably in Rom. 9:6–8), because children came from the "seed" of man. Likewise here the paternity of God is stressed. Those who are birthed from God's seed will share in his characteristics, just as natural children share the characteristics of their biological parents.

3:10 This concluding statement summarizes John's point in the preceding verses. The behavior of individuals should make clear their spiritual state. We will resemble our father, whether it be God or the Devil. One's lack of righteousness and lack of love for fellow believers lead to a lack of any assurance that such a person is a Christian.

Response

John lifts his readers' eyes beyond the current distress to their blessed hope in order to bolster them for day-to-day faithfulness. Calvin aptly said,

Our present condition is very short of the glow of God's children; . . . death is always before our eyes; we are also subject to [a] thousand miseries, and the soul is exposed to innumerable evils. . . . The more necessary it is that all our thoughts should be withdrawn from the present view of things, lest the miseries by which we are on every side surrounded and almost overwhelmed, should shake our faith in that felicity which as yet lies hid. For the Apostle's meaning is this, that we act very foolishly when we estimate what God has bestowed on us according to the present state of things, but that we ought with undoubting faith to hold to that which does not yet appear.³⁶

Scripture makes clear that we do not attain sinless perfection in this life. We anticipate such perfection at Christ's coming (1 John 3:2). However, conversion produces a real change in our lives. On the one hand, we must not allow this to be brushed off so that people who claim faith can continue floating along despite their lack of concern for holiness. On the other hand, we must help sensitive souls who never find assurance because they never see enough holiness in their own lives. We must indeed heed the call to examine ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5), but we must recognize that this is not merely an individualistic effort. We need the community of faith to help us in this examination lest we be either too lax or too harsh in our assessment.

³⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 204.

1 JOHN 3:11–24

¹¹For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. ¹²We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. ¹³Do not be surprised, brothers,¹ that the world hates you. ¹⁴We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death. ¹⁵Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

¹⁶By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? ¹⁸Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

¹⁹By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; ²⁰for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. ²¹Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; ²²and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. ²³And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. ²⁴Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God,² and God³ in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters*; also verses 14, 16

²Greek *him* ³Greek *he*

Section Overview

The theme of love returned somewhat abruptly at the end of 1 John 3:10, forming a hook for a return to the topic in 3:11–24. Verse 11 serves as the thesis statement for this unit—John's audience knows they have been commanded to love one another. Verses 12–15 explain this in terms of a contrast between hate and murder. Verses 16–18 provide the positive example of love (the cross) and an explanation of what such love looks like in everyday terms. In light of this challenging call, verses 19–24 discuss how we may have confidence despite our failures.

Section Outline

- IX. The Necessity of Love and Gospel Comfort (3:11–24)
 - A. Renewed Call to Love (3:11)

- B. Love versus Hate and Murder (3:12–15)
- C. The Cross as the Ultimate Example of Love (3:16–18)
- D. Assurance despite Our Failures (3:19–24)

Comment

3:11 John likes to remind his audience that what he is urging corresponds to the truth they have heard “from the beginning” (2:7, 24). John is not peddling in novelty, which may suggest that the false teachers are.

3:12 For a counterexample John reaches back to Cain in Genesis 4, perhaps reinforcing the fact that this love command goes back to the “beginning.” The opposite of love is hatred (mentioned explicitly in the next verse), which leads to murder. And what leads to such hatred-inspired murder? The evildoer hates the one who does righteousness. This connects John’s points concerning the practice of righteousness and the love we ought to have for one another.

3:13 Here John makes his application. The first murder (by Cain) was caused by hatred of righteousness by the wicked. Therefore, we should not be surprised when the world, which is opposed to God, hates us, who do righteous deeds because we are God’s children. The Bible states clearly that we should expect such opposition, and if we are shocked by it, our ignorance of the Bible is exposed (John 16:33; 2 Tim. 3:12; cf. Psalm 2).

3:14 Love for fellow believers is evidence of conversion, that one has been transformed from the realm of death to the realm of life. This is one way we can know the reality of our conversion. This also shows that such love is supernatural: it does not arise naturally in fallen hearts but requires the supernatural work of God. On the other hand, anyone who does not have such love remains in the realm of death.

3:15 Now John makes explicit the connection between hatred and murder. Echoing Jesus’ words (Matt. 5:21–22), John says that to hate a brother is to violate the command against murder. Hatred makes one a murderer, and it is well known, John says, that no murderer has eternal life.

The Evil One inspires hatred of God’s people, ranging from lack of care to actually destroying them (murder). This is because the Evil One was a murderer from the beginning (John 8:44). Thus Cain, the first murderer, is “of the evil one” (1 John 3:12), meaning he belonged to and was from the realm of the Devil. All of those who live in the realm of the Evil One, who abide in death, will hate God’s people.

John is not claiming that no murderer can be converted (indeed, the apostle Paul would be a counterexample!). Nor is he speaking of self-defense or accidental slaying.³⁷ Rather, he is declaring that no one who is converted can wantonly destroy innocent human life. It is striking that the word used here for “murderer”

³⁷ The OT makes these distinctions (Ex. 21:12–14; Deut. 4:41–43; 19:1–13).

(*anthrōpoktonos*) occurs elsewhere in the NT only in John 8:44, where it refers to the Devil.

Regarding the connection between hatred and murder, I. Howard Marshall aptly states, “We may not like to put the point so frankly, but it is good that the real character of hatred should be so unambiguously displayed, so as to warn us against it. . . . Hatred is incompatible with spiritual life. Put otherwise, the person who hates another wants to deprive him of life; such a person clearly does not belong to the realm of life.”³⁸

3:16 After offering this negative example, John returns to the exhortation to love. Jesus’ giving of himself, culminating at the cross, teaches us what love is and calls us to follow his example. Whereas hate leads to taking another’s life, love leads to laying down one’s own.

3:17 Laying down one’s life involves meeting the basic needs of others. The phrase “the world’s goods” uses the same word discussed in 2:16 (*bios*). The situation in view is clear—one believer has financial means and sees another believer in need. If a believer knows of such a fellow brother in need but closes his heart against him, such behavior calls into question this believer’s faith.

There is a deliberate switch here from plural (general) in verse 16 to singular (specific) in verse 17. As G. P. Lewis points out, “It is easier to be enthusiastic about Humanity with a capital ‘H’ than it is to love individual men and women, especially those who are uninteresting, exasperating, depraved, or otherwise unattractive. Loving everybody in general may be an excuse for loving nobody in particular.”³⁹

3:18 John’s term of endearment (“little children”) draws specific attention to his concluding point, summarizing the last two verses. Real love, the love of God that John has been addressing, is not simply “word or talk.” It always results in deeds. God so loved the world that he *gave* (John 3:16).

Of course, this does not mean that loving words or talk are useless! John himself demonstrates loving talk in this letter. His point is that true love is not *merely* talk or sentiment. Love is not content only to speak but must act for the good of the one loved. That which only feels and speaks but does not act is not true love. Love without works is dead.

3:19–20 “By this” refers back to the previous verses. Thus, as we love “in truth” (genuinely) we will have assurance (“we shall know”) that we are “of the truth,” which is another of John’s phrases referring to knowing God or being converted (like practicing or being in the truth; 1:6–8). Obedience leads to assurance. John is writing to a flock rocked by the departure of a number who claimed to have the truth, and he is repeatedly showing them how they can see that they are right for continuing in the apostolic pattern. “This” love, which he has been describing, is the right way.

³⁸ Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 191–192.

³⁹ G. P. Lewis, cited in Stott, *Letters of John*, 147.

However, there will also be times in which we will need to “reassure our heart” before God,⁴⁰ presumably because we are painfully aware of the deficiency of even our best love. Thus, when our hearts condemn us, John tells us to look to God. We do examine our lives to see the obedience that results from faith, but in the end we look to God and not to ourselves. We repent of sin, seek to obey, and look to God, knowing that he is greater than our hearts and knows everything. He knows all our sin, and he knows his atoning work. In other words, despite a smiting conscience, we can remind ourselves that what God has forgiven stands forgiven forever. As Paul said, “If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:31–34).

3:21 Having addressed the remedy for a condemning heart, John now addresses his readers with another of his terms of endearment as he moves to the blessing of a cleared conscience. We can almost feel a sense of excitement as he makes this transition, reminding them that they are indeed “beloved.” When our hearts no longer condemn us because we rest in the work of Christ, we can approach God with confidence (similarly in Heb. 10:19–20, with the same word for “confidence”). This is precisely what Charles Wesley described when he wrote, in his hymn “Amazing Love,”

No condemnation now I dread;
 Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
 Alive in Him, my living Head,
 And clothed in righteousness divine,
 Bold I approach the eternal throne,
 And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

3:22 Along with the previous verse, this verse makes clear that the context of prayer is in view. The confidence of a conscience cleared by grace leads to effective prayer. We must be careful neither to abuse nor to minimize what John says. On the one hand, the promise of “whatever we ask” must not be construed as the basis for a prosperity theology, which tells us simply to “name it and claim it.” Despite the worldwide popularity of this idea, such beliefs miss the entire thrust of Scripture as well as the qualification here that we must obey God and do what pleases him. Prayers for mere self-gratification or self-exaltation do not please God.

Because of this abuse, however, some Christians fail to take seriously the promise that is indeed given (also in Matt. 7:7; Mark 11:24). As we obey and please God, asking for things that please him because they are in line with his commands, God will answer our prayers and do great things. This should encourage us to obey and pray.

⁴⁰ Some suggest “before him” in verse 19 refers to the final judgment. However, the “whenever” of verse 20 argues against such a reading. John has in view any time we feel guilty before God and thus unable to come before him.

3:23 Having mentioned obedience to commands, John specifies two such key commands. The first is to “believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ.” This is quite similar to Jesus’ statement in John 6:29. The title “his Son Jesus Christ” connotes the full confession of the person of Christ, which the false teachers deny (cf. 1 John 2:22–23). The second command is to “love one another,” as the sent Son commanded. Thus John repeats two key themes of the letter to this point: Effective prayer, then, is contingent on right belief in the person of Christ and genuine love for believers.⁴¹

3:24 Continuing the theme of keeping God’s commandments, John writes that such obedience shows that a person abides in God and that God abides in him. Abiding in God is another of John’s phrases denoting true Christianity. Earlier John connected abiding in God with obedience (2:6; 3:6) and with being confident at the return of Christ (2:28). God’s Word (2:14), anointing (2:27), seed (3:9), and love (3:17) are all said to “abide” in believers. This is the truth of which Jesus spoke in John 15 and refers to the interrelatedness of life between God and his children, with God as their source of life. “In John’s theology, abiding is the epitome of trust in Christ, like being ‘in Christ’ in Paul,” explains Yarbrough.⁴²

“By this” refers back to keeping God’s commandments (1 John 3:24a). Obedience is how we know God abides in us. This is in keeping with what John has written elsewhere in this letter, as well as with the consistent NT witness that faith produces works. This assurance of God’s abiding in us comes also through the work of the Spirit. Paul also speaks of confidence that comes “through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Mention of the Spirit here sets up the new focus on his work in the next section.

Response

We should not be surprised by the hatred of the world but rather should be surprised by any lack of love within the church. Sadly, too often today this is reversed. Church members expect conflict within the church but are taken aback by opposition from the world. We desperately need John’s challenge in order to reclaim the deep loving community that can be built on the gospel and then face confidently the opposition of the world.

The love John calls for is quite demanding. John challenges us to be willing to make the supreme sacrifice (3:16) and then keeps us from thinking merely of grand sacrifices by pointing to daily needs (3:17). Care and awareness of such needs will not arise simply from weekly attendance at the same meeting as others in need. The church envisioned here is not merely a place to go but a family to which to belong.

John’s clear words concerning the necessity of obedience combined with his careful handling of troubled consciences (3:19–24) is rich in pastoral lessons. Too

⁴¹ Interestingly, a failure of love by Christian husbands toward their wives may also hinder their prayers (1 Pet. 3:7).

⁴² Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 216.

often believers choose either a firm stand for truth or a gentleness with troubled souls, as if the two were mutually exclusive. John shows us another way: the gospel makes clear, nonnegotiable claims upon us and then reminds us of the hope and power found in Christ.

1 JOHN 4:1–6

4 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. ⁴Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

Section Overview

The Spirit was mentioned at the end of the previous section, setting up the focus on him in the section at hand. Having just discussed the difficult issue of discerning our own hearts, John moves to the discernment of “spirits,” those claiming to speak as inspired by the Spirit. In many ways, this section of 1 John parallels 1 John 2:18–27.

Section Outline

- X. The Necessity of Discernment and the Spirit of Antichrist (4:1–6)
 - A. Call to Discernment (4:1)
 - B. The Test: Confession of Jesus (4:2–3)
 - C. Comfort to a Rattled Church (4:4–5)
 - D. Confirmation: Listening to God and His Apostles (4:6)

Comment

4:1 Once more the vocative term of endearment “Beloved” marks the shift to a new section. This direct address calls for refocused attention as John again warns his readers about false teachers. The “spirits” in view here are men who claim to speak under the prompting of the Spirit. John stresses that discernment is necessary, for numerous false teachers will claim the inspiration of the Spirit. We do not have

to believe people just because they claim that God told them what to say. Such people could be sincerely misled or even intentionally deceitful. These ideas or teachings (“spirits”) must always be tested rather than simply taken at face value. The manner of testing is what John addresses next.

4:2 John’s characteristic “by this you know” introduces the test he prescribes for questionable teachings (cf. 4:1 and comment). Our aim is to “know the Spirit of God,” that is, to recognize whether or not the Holy Spirit is behind any questionable teaching. To be considered as being from God, every idea or teacher must affirm that Jesus is the incarnate Messiah. This concern about proper understanding of the person and work of Christ was mentioned previously, in 2:18–23, which has many similarities to this section.

4:3 To “confess Jesus” is a shorthand way of referring to the full affirmation of 4:2. Any teacher or doctrine that fails to affirm, or that perhaps undermines, the messiahship and incarnation of Jesus cannot be from God. Instead, such teaching is the “spirit of the antichrist.” As in 2:18, John reminds his readers that they knew such a spirit was coming and that it is now currently active.

This flies in the face of much of modern Western Christianity, which seems to think that sincerity is all that matters and that doctrinal distinctives are insignificant if one means well. Of course doctrinal precision is not all that matters, but certain doctrines must be clearly held in order for a person to be part of God’s people. No matter how well-intentioned one is, if he denies the incarnation of Jesus, he is not a true member of Christ’s church.

4:4 The reality of a sinister spirit at work that is opposed to Christ should be disconcerting, and no doubt was to John’s audience, since they had just witnessed the effect of this spirit in their own church. So, having mentioned this reality, John turns to comforting his beloved “little children.” His comfort is threefold. First, he reminds them that they are “from God,” like the spirit that confesses Jesus (4:2) and unlike the false spirit (4:3).⁴³ The distinction of being “from God” or “from the world” will be a major theme in the rest of this section. Despite whatever the false teachers may say, these believers who are holding fast can be encouraged by the apostolic witness that they are rooted in God.

Secondly, these faithful believers have “overcome” the false teachers and those who follow them (the spirit of antichrist). We do not know what percentage of this church left and what percentage stayed, but it may have felt like evil was winning. John encourages them that they have in fact overcome, no matter what they were feeling (cf. more on this in the comment on 5:4).

Third, the basis for the certainty of victory is that the one who is in them, empowering them—God—is greater than the one who is in and empowering the world. The one in the world is not explicitly identified but is ultimately the Devil, who has been in view at various times (2:14; 3:10, 12).

⁴³ The same Greek phrase, *ek tou theou*, is used in each instance of the phrase “from God” in verses 2–4.

Thus believers should recognize the serious reality of spiritual danger, but they should not be paralyzed by fear, because they know God—that he has made them his own (they are “from” him, and he is in them) and that he is more powerful than all the forces arrayed against them. This fundamental truth can be found throughout Scripture and is the basis for Christian courage and composure in a fallen world.

4:5 In contrast, those who follow the false teachers are “from the world” (the realm of hostility to God, which believers are not to love; cf. 2:15). John has just explained that the false teachers’ connection to the world is why faithful believers have overcome them (4:4). Here he explains why such conquered people seem to have such success: the world is attracted their message because they are “on the same page.” False teachers will commonly gain a great following because they tell the world what the world wants to hear. A message tailored to the desires of the world will always find a following, but it will not lead to life. This is a resounding warning against assessing any ministry by the number of its followers.

4:6 “We,” as in chapter 1, refers to John and the broader apostolic witness (cf. comment on 1:1). In 4:4 he said that “you,” his hearers, were from God. Here he includes himself—“we”—because now he is speaking of the message proclaimed. John is from God (he meets the test of v. 2), and therefore those who know God listen to his message, while those who are not from God do not listen to him.

This is no license for any given preacher to say, “I am from God, and thus whoever listens to me is from God, and whoever does not like me does not know God.” Instead we must recognize this to be the inspired apostolic witness speaking. The status of message/messenger from God is not a subjective thing to be appropriated by whoever might do so. Rather, it is clearly delineated in this letter that to be “from God” is to be those who affirm Jesus as incarnate Messiah and Son of God, who pursue holiness and love fellow believers. The point is that those who truly know God listen to this sort of message. Those who do not like such a message prove that they do not know God. This is the point of the last sentence of verse 6: believers can tell the difference between the “Spirit of truth” and the “spirit of error” by whether or not any given teacher heeds the apostolic witness.

Response

In a particularly gullible age, the church desperately needs the discernment this text describes. Far too often Christians fall for false teachers and charlatans simply because they claim to speak for God and tack on a few Bible verses. Some authoritarian leaders suggest that to doubt them is to doubt God. But this text calls for us to examine every teacher in light of revealed Scripture. Indeed, the Bible commends as “noble” those who double-checked the apostle Paul by searching the Scriptures (Acts 17:11). Any true gospel minister will welcome such testing. Such vigilance indicates not a thoroughgoing skepticism but an allegiance to Scripture and a healthy awareness of the reality of false teachers.

1 JOHN 4:7–12

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

Section Overview

Having discussed the sharp divide between believers and the world, and the need for vigilance regarding false teaching, John now turns to the need for love within the church. Too easily, defense against error can lead us to forget the need for building a community of intentional love toward one another. John never allows his hearers to forget that the “Spirit of truth” (1 John 4:6) is always connected to love.

In this paragraph John asserts once again the necessity of loving other Christians (vv. 7–8) and explains what love is by pointing to the cross (vv. 9–10). Then he applies this truth to his hearers, calling on them to emulate this exemplary love (vv. 11–12).

Section Outline

- XI. Love That Reveals God (4:7–12)
 - A. Love Is Nonnegotiable (4:7–8)
 - B. The Supreme Example of Love: The Cross (4:9–10)
 - C. The Practice of Love and Its Result (4:11–12)

Comment

4:7 Once again, direct address using a term of endearment marks the transition to a new section. Here the term, “beloved,” also introduces the theme. John returns to the recurring theme of love, now *giving* a command rather than discussing one.⁴⁴ This first-person-plural command to love is particularly Johannine language.⁴⁵

Christians must love one another for two reasons. First, love originates from God, and so his people should be marked by it. Second, love is evidence of being

⁴⁴ John uses a hortatory subjunctive, a grammatical form for giving a command in the first person.

⁴⁵ Cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 233, for its uniqueness to John.

“born of God” and “know[ing] God.” Love is fundamental to God’s character; thus his children must bear the family resemblance. This does not mean that anyone who does something loving or kind is by that fact alone a believer in Christ. There is no basis here for universalism or an inclusivism that teaches that people who deny Christ will be saved apart from faith. Such an idea would flatly contradict what John says elsewhere in this letter. Unbelievers can be loving and kind, but John is describing a deep, self-sacrificial sort of love that is directed specifically by Christians toward other Christians.

4:8 If one does not love in this way, he must not know God, for this love is central to who God is. The statement “God is love” (repeated at 4:16) is a momentous theological point, one that J. I. Packer calls “one of the most tremendous utterances in the Bible.”⁴⁶ It is also true that much misunderstanding has arisen here.

What does it mean to say that “God is love”? It is helpful to consider this statement alongside the other statement of God’s basic character in 1:5: “God is light.” Neither statement intends to reduce God to an abstract idea or emotion. Rather, these statements refer to God’s action, the essential elements of his character that shape all that he does, and thus how we experience him. Thus, God is loving in all he does: “The love which he shows to men, and which Christians know and rejoice in, is a revelation of His own inner being.”⁴⁷ This is amazing news for sinful beings like us. It brings us to the glory and beauty of the gospel that an all holy God (1:5) would choose to love sinners and accomplish their salvation and sanctification. Surely Packer is right that in this doctrine we stand on holy ground.⁴⁸

4:9 Since this love is so crucial, John turns now to make clear what it looks like in concrete terms by pointing to the supreme example of love, the work of Christ. This love was “made manifest” or “revealed” among us. The verb used here (*phaneroō*) typically refers to the revelation of something that was previously hidden. God’s love for humanity stretches back to before the dawn of time, and although it was revealed in part throughout the OT, it was fully revealed only in the sending of the Son to redeem us. In language strikingly similar to John 3:16,⁴⁹ John shows that this event dwarfs all others in terms of its demonstration of God’s love (cf. also Rom. 5:8). This statement and others like it point to the fact that this work of Christ is the center-point of all of Scripture.

The “sending” of the Son envisions the full work of Christ—incarnation, life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension. The one sent is God’s “only” Son. The adjective used (*monogenēs*) stresses the uniqueness of Jesus as God’s son,⁵⁰ as Calvin wrote, “He who is his only Son by nature, makes many sons by grace and adoption.”⁵¹ Whereas false teachers went out “into the world” to deceive (1 John

⁴⁶ Packer, *Knowing God*, 106.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 108.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Marshall says that “there can be no doubt that he is deliberately reminding his readers of that tremendous declaration” (*Epistles of John*, 213).

⁵⁰ Cf. ibid., 214n8 for detailed discussion of the meaning of *monogenēs*.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 239.

4:1), the Son was sent “into the world” (same Greek phrase) “so that we might live through him” (v. 9). This is why his work is a demonstration of love—at great cost to himself, Jesus rescued us. Thus two things are involved in this love: self-sacrifice, and action done for the benefit of others.⁵²

4:10 John further clarifies love, stating very clearly where love began: it began with God, not with us. Our love is weak, fragile, inconstant. We could not be the measure of true love. Rather, God is the standard and the initiator of love. Before we did anything, he “sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” As Paul says, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

As in 4:9, God’s love is demonstrated by his sending of the Son. Here the work of the Son is more specifically delineated. “Propitiation” describes Jesus’ work at the cross as a sacrifice that turns away God’s holy wrath because of our sins (cf. comment on 2:2). As he often does, John refers to large theological realities without elaboration. By referring to propitiation, John says that God’s love is seen in the fact that he sent his Son to die a cruel death, bearing the full fury of the Father’s wrath for our sins so that we might be forgiven and redeemed. He came to die that we might live. This is no mere sentimental indulgence. This is love. William Rees (1802–1883) captured this truth well in his classic hymn, “Here Is Love”:

Here is love, vast as the ocean,
Lovingkindness as the flood,
When the Prince of life, our ransom,
Shed for us His precious blood. . . .

On the mount of crucifixion
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God’s mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And heaven’s peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.

4:11 “Beloved” marks John’s return to his exhortation. Having paused to define love by pointing to the work of Christ, John now comes back to his hortatory purpose, saying in essence, “Beloved, in view of this amazing love, as recipients of such a persevering, sacrificial, effective love, how can we not love one another as well?” This is the root of all of John’s statements declaring that one who does not love his brother cannot know God. If one knows this love that has just been described, he will love in return. As a skilled preacher, John has moved from the pinnacle of marvelous theological truth to pointed moral exhortation. Adoration must lead to action.

⁵² Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 214.

4:12 The connection of this verse to the preceding material is not immediately clear. That no one can see God because he is spirit is a basic truth of the Bible (Ex. 33:20; 1 Tim. 1:17), but one might wonder what the point is of the assertion here. There does not seem to have been any questioning of this truth among John's hearers. Rather, John is arguing from a theological given to an ethical necessity. Since God cannot be seen, Christians can "show" him to a watching world only by loving one another.

When Christians love one another, God abides in them; he dwells in their midst. And his love, which has just been so powerfully described, is brought to completion in them. To say God's love is "perfected" is not to suggest a deficiency in God's love. Rather, the word (*teleioō*) means "to complete," to bring to its intended outcome: "God's already pristine love find[s] its fullest possible earthly expression as people respond to the message of Christ and reach out to one another as a result."⁵³ Thus the way for God to be "seen," recognized—for people to see that he is real—is for Christians actively and aggressively to care for one another.

Response

This is a rich text in terms of doctrine, delight, and duty. We need to think long, deep, and often on the reality of God's love. Knowledge of such love is the crying need of the soul. Broken, needy souls trample and devour one another looking for this balm, though they do not know that this is what they seek. J. I. Packer is right to note that "to know God's love is indeed heaven on earth."⁵⁴ We should revel in this reality and allow it to lead us to worship. Then we must take this glorious news to those who do not yet know it.

Since John calls us to love as we have been loved, we would do well to contemplate how it is that God has loved us:

- He loved first. He did not wait for us to make the first move. Ours must also be an initiating love.
- He loved those who hated him. We cannot excuse ourselves from love because people are difficult. If the *sinless* God can love *sinful* people, then *sinful* people can surely love other *sinful* people.
- He loved those who were different than he. No human will ever be more different from us than we are from God. Our love must not be limited to those who are like us.
- His love accomplished what was best for us even though it was not what we wanted at the time.
- His love continued when it was not convenient.
- His love perseveres even though we wrong and offend him.
- He loved at extreme cost.

⁵³ Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 245.

⁵⁴ Packer, *Knowing God*, 106.

- His love found concrete expression—not merely vague feelings but real action.

Furthermore, churches must be communities marked by this intentional care and love. All the outreach programs in the world cannot approach the power of seeing this love lived out in tangible ways on a consistent basis. John has told us that this is the way God will be seen. But, too often, it is easier to plan another program than to engage in messy, vulnerable love for one another. This commentator has seen this lived out as fellow believers went out of their way to minister to my family in times of grief and suffering, and onlookers were bewildered by what they saw: “Who are these people? Why would they go to such trouble for you?” When I told them they were members of our church, they responded, “What kind of church do you go to?” Even in my Bible Belt community, the door was now open to explain the love of God.

1 JOHN 4:13–21

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot¹ love God whom he has not seen. ²¹And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

¹Some manuscripts *how can he*

Section Overview

This section continues the themes of loving and abiding. First John 4:13–16 lists three evidences that a person has truly come to faith in Christ. In each case there is a reference to the believer’s abiding in God and God’s abiding in the believer. Verses 17–21 then elaborate on the last evidence, love, picking up the idea of “perfected” love from 4:12 (vv. 17, 18 [2x]).

Section Outline

- XII. Abiding in God and Perfected Love (4:13–21)
 - A. Three Evidences of Conversion (4:13–16)
 - 1. Having Received the Spirit (4:13)
 - 2. Confessing that Jesus Is the Son of God (4:14–15)
 - 3. Abiding in Love (4:16)
 - B. Elaboration on Love (4:17–21)

Comment

4:13 “By this” points forward, as John lists three evidences of true conversion.⁵⁵ The first evidence is that God has given us his Spirit. Exactly how this functions as proof is not stated here. It could be a point similar to Paul’s in Romans 8:16: “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” John’s wording is very similar to that of 1 John 3:24, where we argued that the Spirit assures us of God’s presence in us as we obey. Here the mutual indwelling of God and believers is evidenced by the Spirit’s work, which seems to be to inspire and elicit the love that has been discussed: “To abide in one another reciprocally is to know and love one another, and this love is fostered by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁶ John is not claiming that we know we are Christians because of some feeling that we have his Spirit; rather, he is pointing out that the fact that we love fellow believers is evidence of the Spirit’s work in us, which is then confirmation of our conversion.

4:14 Before moving on to the second evidence of conversion, John pauses to accentuate apostolic authority for this evidence. With language harking back to the letter’s opening, where the authority of John and the other apostles was established (1:1–3), John reinforces the certainty of the person and work of Christ, which was clearly under attack (2:23–24; 4:3; 5:10). John stresses that, while no one has seen the Father (4:12), John and the other apostolic witnesses have seen that Jesus was in fact sent, that he is the Son, and that he is the Savior.⁵⁷ The sending of Jesus by the Father refers to his incarnation as well as to his divine source and mission, which was denied by some (4:2; 5:6; 2 John 7). Jesus’ sonship establishes his deity and oneness with the Father, which was also being denied (1 John 2:23–24). “Savior of the world” refers to Jesus’ mission, which was possible only if he indeed was the sent Son (a mission just described in 4:9–10; cf. similar language in John 4:42).⁵⁸ The veracity of these truths leads to the next evidence of conversion.

4:15 Whoever “confesses” the truth of 4:14 enjoys mutual indwelling with God. To confess is not merely to state something but is to own the idea as truth. It is a

⁵⁵ In Greek the phrase “by this” is the same as “in this” in 4:9 and 10 (*en toutō*), which also point forward.

⁵⁶ Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 269.

⁵⁷ Some argue that the “we” here refers to John and his audience as it does in the previous verse. However, in 4:14 the specific Greek pronoun appears (*hēmeis*) rather than simply a verb ending as in 4:13. This can be used to signal a change in referent, and the similarity with the language in 1:1–3 suggests the apostolic witness is primarily in view.

⁵⁸ Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 188, argues that this phrase means the same thing as “Lord.”

statement of belief. To confess Jesus as “Son of God” means to affirm all that John has just said about him in the previous verse.

This confession of Jesus as the Son of God is the second evidence of conversion, using the same phrase as 4:13 for the mutual indwelling between believers and God. In short, affirming the historicity of the incarnation of Christ is a prerequisite for true knowledge of—and relationship with—God.

4:16 As 4:14 set the basis for the evidence of faith in 4:15, so the first half of this verse sets the basis for the evidence stated in the last half. The apostolic witness has testified to the truth of Jesus, and here the whole church bears witness to the veracity of God’s love for his people.⁵⁹ Concerning what he had expounded in 4:9–10, John now says, in effect, “We all know this is true, do we not?” The language mirrors John 6:69, where Peter makes the confession called for in 1 John 4:15.

Further buttressing the astonishing reality of God’s love for his people, John reiterates his point from 4:8: “God is love.” Therefore, in light of God’s astounding love for us, we ought to “[abide] in love.” In one sense this means to “remain in love,” that is, to continue believing the truth that God loves us and not to be dissuaded by the Devil’s lies. On the other hand, this also means to “live in love,” exhibiting this love to others. This is a continuation of the point made in 4:11. The one who thus “abides in love” shows that he is truly a believer, that he “abides in God, and God abides in him.”

4:17 Having listed his three evidences of conversion, John now elaborates on the third evidence (loving fellow believers), reiterating the idea of 4:7–12. “By this” refers to loving one another (cf. v. 16). Thus, just as in 4:12, God’s love comes to its fruition among us as we love one another. John now adds that this completion of God’s love will give us “confidence for the day of judgment.” As in 2:28, abiding in God is the basis of such confidence, though there the abiding was linked to doctrinal fidelity and here it is linked to loving fellow believers. John thus continues to show that these issues are inextricably linked.

The “day of judgment” is referred to without elaboration, showing that John expected his readers to be well acquainted with the central NT truth that we will give account of ourselves before God. This is rightly a sobering reality. John’s point is that knowing that the Judge loves us deeply provides confidence (despite our fallenness) for that day. The love of God is our only hope.

This confidence is rooted in the love described in the previous verse (“by this”) and in the fact that “as he is so also are we in this world.” In 3:2, following a statement concerning confidence at his coming, John stated that we will be like Jesus when we see him at that coming. In this verse, however, we are like him *now*. In 3:2 John was addressing how we will share in the glory and holiness of Jesus, while here in 4:17 John is addressing our participation with Jesus in the same relationship of love with the Father. This draws from the truth regarding Jesus’ sonship

⁵⁹ The use here of the pronoun “we” shifts back to referring to John and his audience together.

that has just been asserted (4:15–16): just as he is the beloved Son, so now we also, while still in this world, are beloved children due to our adoption (3:1). Therefore, we have confidence because the Judge before whom we will one day stand is our beloved Father, who has chosen to make us his children. Though it will still be sobering, we can stand before such a judge with assurance. As Luther said, “If consciousness of a great sin weighs you down, comfort yourself with this blood of love. . . . No human religion can hold its own in the face of the judgment, but it is solely in the blood of Christ that we can have confidence in the Day of Judgment.”⁶⁰

4:18 This verse is often thought to be confusing because it is taken out of context, suggesting that fear and love can never go together. But we know that the Bible commends both fear and love of God. Notice both of these points, for instance, in Deuteronomy 6:1–5, a central OT text:

This is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you . . . that you may *fear* the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son. . . . Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall *love* the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.⁶¹

Following his previous statement, John is affirming that love casts out fear of rejection or condemnation in judgment. We cannot know that someone completely loves us while also fearing that he will reject us. When we fear that another will reject us, we fear that his love is not complete. Having just affirmed God’s perfected love for us, John tells us that such love drives out this fear of condemnation—this is why it is such an assurance. Therefore, whoever fears such punishment or condemnation has not yet been brought to the fullness of knowing and believing the love of God (1 John 4:16).

4:19 John pauses to make clear where such love begins: it begins with God, not with us. John has been arguing all along that because God has loved us, we should love as well. His mode of argumentation has thus assumed the priority of God’s love for us. Now he makes this explicit, even more so than he did in 4:10. God, in love, first thought of us before the dawn of time, then at the cross he bought us, and then he sought us until he caught us and brought us into his kingdom. Our love for God, then, is in no way meritorious but rather is our grateful response to the demonstration of his love. The more we are aware of God’s love, the more we love in return. “It is, therefore, good for us constantly to renew our knowledge of God’s love as we read of it in the Bible, as we hear it proclaimed in the worship of the church, and as we consider the ways in which our whole life has been molded by experiences of God’s love and care for us.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Cited by Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 260.

⁶¹ These elements are also often combined in the Psalms; cf. Psalm 34 for one example.

⁶² Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 225.

4:20 This love for God *must* result in love for other believers, as John has been urging. If one does not love God's people, he does not love God; thus to claim to love God while refusing to love his people makes one a "liar."

Now John expounds on why a claim to love God while hating God's people makes no sense. He has just affirmed in 4:12 the basic biblical truth that no one can see God (since he is spirit). How, then, can one love someone he *cannot* see if he does not love the one he *can* see? Throughout this letter, "love" for John has meant not nice feelings but direct action. How could anyone act lovingly toward someone he cannot see? One way to act lovingly toward the unseen God is to love his people.

This is a strong point against mysticism. We cannot demonstrate love toward God while being hidden away by ourselves, concerned only with ourselves and God. To love God we must care for his people. Thus it is ludicrous to claim we love God while failing to assemble with his people. The Bible knows nothing of a "just me and God" religion.

4:21 John develops a specific command from the Scriptures that we must love fellow believers. As Jesus summarized the OT law as requiring love for God and for neighbors, so now John declares that the command is to love God *by* loving one's brothers. Such love is the way to demonstrate love for a God we cannot see. Thus there is simply no way around the requirement to love one another. If we do not love other believers in concrete terms, there is simply no way we could truly know God.

Response

It is not a small thing to believe that God truly does love his people deeply and faithfully. Typical human experience tells us that love is fickle, and surely none of us would tolerate the unfaithfulness we know we have exhibited toward God. Additionally, we have an enemy who whispers in our ear, "It is too good to be true. He cannot really love *you*. Not anymore. Not after what you have done." This is why we need the affirmation of 4:9–10: so that we might make the confession of 4:16. Knowing and believing the love of God for us empowers us to love others in the way John teaches.

1 JOHN 5:1–5

5 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. ⁴For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. ⁵Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

Section Overview

This section continues to address love for other believers, bringing obedience and faith back into the discussion. The unit opens and closes with mentions of faith (1 John 5:1, 4–5) and of being born of God. In Johannine fashion, faith, love, and obedience are shown to be deeply intertwined. Faith in Jesus is evidence of new birth, and those who love God must love those born of God. Thus those “born of God” share a common faith (“our faith”; v. 4). Loving God’s children entails loving God and obeying God, and love for God itself entails obedience to God. Despite the onslaught of the world, this requirement of loving obedience is not overwhelming, because faith in Jesus as the Son of God empowers us.

Section Outline

XIII. Faith in Jesus Overcomes the World (5:1–5)

- A. Interconnectedness of Faith, Love, and Obedience (5:1–3)
- B. Faith Overcomes the World (5:4–5)

Comment

5:1 John continues to insist that one who loves God must love other Christians as well. Here he does so by identifying those who have been born of God. Everyone who trusts in Jesus as the Messiah (implying the full confession just discussed in 4:14–15) has been born of God.⁶³ Thus, anyone who loves God will love those who are born of him. If we love him, we will love his children.

John’s point will continue with love, but it is worthwhile to pause to note that John has identified faith as another mark of conversion. Faith is central to Christian living, as John will make clear in 5:4–5. This does not mean, however, that all who

⁶³ For further discussion about all that is implied by affirming Jesus as Messiah, cf. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 209.

simply profess faith have been converted. John makes clear that saving faith has a transformative effect. Such life-transforming faith is a mark of the children of God.

5:2 Having written earlier that love for believers proves one's love for God, John now states that love for God proves one's love for believers. This is not double-talk, however. John is implying that this divinely implanted love moves in both directions, necessarily producing love toward people and toward God. Furthermore, the love of others that John is commending is not merely human. We love others properly when we are also loving God. A "love" that places any human, rather than God, as primary in our affections is not proper love. As Calvin comments, "Men are rightly and duly loved, when God holds the primacy. . . . For it often happens, that we love men apart from God, as unholy and carnal friendships regard only private advantages or some other vanishing objects."⁶⁴

True love for fellow children of God is seen also in obedience to God's commands, one of which is the requirement to love fellow believers. The first point showed that love for believers includes loving them under God, for God's sake. This point shows that love for fellow believers is a holy, obedient love. We are not loving others well when we disobey God for them or encourage them to be disobedient in any way to God's commands. This cuts right across our culture's idea that loving someone requires one to affirm whatever that person does.

5:3 Having just mentioned love for God and obedience to his commands as elements of loving others, John now makes clear that these two elements are actually one. To love God is to obey God. John is not denying that affection is a part of love, but here he continues to speak of the active side of love. Proper affection for God will lead to obedience. Where there is no obedience there is no affection for God, despite claims to the contrary. This is what Jesus himself said (John 14:15, 23–24).

The statement that God's "commandments are not burdensome" does not mean that obedience is easy. Indeed, the Bible is replete with explicit teaching and examples of the difficulty of obedience and the suffering it often entails. Rather, as the next verse will state, divine power is available to enable obedience. Furthermore, the commands of God are all for our good. They are not weights bearing us down and preventing us from attaining true life. They are just the opposite (John 6:63; Psalm 119).

5:4 Even though God's commands cut across the desires of fallen humanity, they are not burdensome because "personal faith enables believers to break free from the world's downward pull."⁶⁵ "Our faith," the faith of those who have been "born of God," provides victory over this world system, which fights against the things of God (cf. comment on 2:15).

The believer's "victory," in this context, would seem to be a "love for God through faith which joyfully embraces God's commands."⁶⁶ This is not a triumphal-

⁶⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, 252.

⁶⁵ Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 275.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

lism that suggests we always succeed in the world's eyes. Rather, it is an overcoming of the temptations and seductions of the world by trusting that God's commands are good and right (Ps. 119:137) and therefore joyfully obeying them despite our fallen flesh. Such victory over the world entails trusting God even when it hurts, even when it seems to cost us. This is true victory, and it comes by faith: trusting God in order to obey him.

5:5 John personalizes the point of verse 4 and specifies the faith mentioned there. This victory comes not merely by believing *something*. Our culture suggests we should “only believe,” regardless of what we believe in. As long as we have faith in something, the world claims, that is all that matters. John does not agree. Rather, what matters is faith in Jesus as the Son of God. The object of our faith is key. This is the confession that began this section and was explained in the preceding one (4:14–15). Belief in Jesus shows that one has been born of God and enables one to overcome the world.

Response

John makes clear that faith in Jesus is at the center of Christian existence. While John has stressed the necessity of obedience, it is clear that this obedience arises from faith in and love for God, all of which are the result of the new birth.

In our fight with sin, we often need this reminder that we are to overcome the world. It can be tempting to give in to resignation to sin—“What did I expect anyway?” Of course we struggle, but God has not left us defenseless, and we dare not downplay the transformative work God has begun by giving us new birth. We must trust God, believe his word, and obey.

Such victory also requires faith to withstand the apparent irresistibility of sin. In the face of temptation and our own weakness, we need a firm belief that Jesus has indeed overcome in order to empower us to hold on. Such faith “rests foursquare on the fact that Jesus Christ has defeated death, and anybody who can defeat death can defeat anything.”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 229.

1 JOHN 5:6–12

⁶This is he who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. ⁷For there are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree. ⁹If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. ¹⁰Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

Section Overview

Building from the emphasis in the last section on proper belief in Jesus, this section emphasizes the strong witnesses, or testimonies, that support such belief (the Greek words for “testify” and “testimony,” sharing the same root, occur ten times in this section). These varied but unified witnesses establish the veracity of Jesus’ identity and work and are from God himself. Thus to fail to accept this testimony is to call God a liar. To believe the truth about Jesus, on the other hand, is to “have the Son” and thus have eternal life. Since John has made clear throughout the letter that all of life depends on God’s Son, this section serves as an anchor to the letter. The letter opened with an affirmation of who Jesus is, and here it begins to conclude with the same theme.

Section Outline

XIV. Testimony to the Person of Christ (5:6–12)

Comment

5:6 As John turns to witnesses to bolster the confession called for in 5:5, he identifies Jesus as the one “who came by water and blood.” Although this phrase is not immediately clear to modern readers, and there has been some debate about its meaning, it almost certainly refers to Jesus’ baptism and death.⁶⁸ Since false teachers were disputing Jesus’ incarnation (4:2–3), this verse identifies Jesus in

⁶⁸ Cf. Akin, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 195–197, for a good discussion of different interpretations. Akin, like most commentators, takes the view argued here.

terms of his earthly ministry, which began publicly with water at his baptism and concluded in blood at his death.

By saying “not by the water only but by the water and the blood,” John stresses Jesus’ death, perhaps suggesting that the false teachers granted the baptism but disputed the death. We cannot be certain as to the exact teachings of these specific false teachers, but we do know that a false teaching did arise in the early church that claimed the divine Christ came upon a merely human Jesus at his baptism and then left him before his death.⁶⁹ In any case, John stresses the importance of belief in the historical death of the God-man, Jesus. The term “blood” also evokes the atoning nature of his death, a point testified to across the NT (e.g., Matt. 26:28; Acts 20:28; Rom. 3:25; 5:9; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 13:12).

The lynchpin for John, though, is that the Spirit testifies to these truths. John’s witness, as eyewitness and member of the apostolic band, is significant (1:1–4), but these truths do not rest on his witness alone. Rather, the Spirit of God himself bears witness. Since the Spirit is truth, his testimony settles the question. One might ask, though, how, when, and where the Spirit testifies. First, the Spirit testified to these truths in the ministry of Jesus (e.g., at his baptism; John 1:32–34), in the inspiration of OT authors who foretold him, and in bringing to remembrance for the NT authors all that Jesus said (John 14:26). Secondly, the Spirit testifies to the truth of Jesus as the Word is proclaimed (1 Cor. 2:9–16). Third, the Spirit confirms the veracity of gospel truths internally to believers (Rom. 8:16).

5:7 OT law required that the truth of a matter be established by two or three witnesses (Deut. 19:15). John seems to appeal to this requirement, as did Jesus (Matt. 18:16) and Paul (2 Cor. 13:1). The witnesses that John presents, even though two of them reference past events (Jesus’ baptism and death), presently testify to Jesus as the Son of God. In the work of the Spirit, the historical becomes homiletical as the import of that which truly occurred in the past is pressed into our hearts.⁷⁰

5:8 The three witnesses are the Spirit, the water, and the blood, all of which have just been discussed. These represent the earthly ministry of Jesus (its beginning and conclusion) and the present work of God through his Spirit. These three witnesses agree in their testimony.⁷¹ The water and blood testify that he came *to* us; the Spirit testifies that he came *for* us.⁷² One provides historical attestation, the other personal appropriation.

5:9 John drives home the necessity of believing this orthodox view of Jesus with an argument from the lesser to the greater. We accept the testimony of mere humans

69 A man named Cerinthus espoused these views, whether or not he or his followers are in view here. Cf. Gareth Lee Cockerill, “Cerinthus,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 1 (Doubleday, 1992), 885.

70 The KJV includes further text in this verse that is not included in the ESV or most other translations. The textual evidence shows that these extra statements are a later addition to the text. For further discussion, cf. Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 236–237; Akin, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 198–200.

71 For discussion of the complicated Greek phrase used here (*eis to hen eisin*; lit., “are into one,” translated “agree”), cf. Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 285; Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 237n21.

72 Here I am borrowing language from Adolf Schlatter (cited in Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 284), though using it in a different way than he did.

when confirmed by two or more witnesses. How much more, then, should we accept the testimony of God himself, since it is the Spirit of God who bears this witness. Rhetorically, this is similar to the repeated OT phrase “Thus says the Lord.” John makes it clear that God has spoken on this issue: Jesus is the divine Son of God who came in the flesh and died, and to refuse to believe this truth is to refuse to believe God.

5:10 There are only two possible responses to this testimony—belief or unbelief—and they have very different results. Belief in this message leads to the indwelling of the Spirit, so that this testimony is now within the believer as the Spirit bears witness. Unbelief is rejection of God. The one who “does not believe God has made him a liar.” These are stark words, but they fit John’s language throughout the letter. John is not being dramatic or ungracious. Rather, he is earnest about the eternal fate of men’s souls. In light of the clear testimony of God, substantiated by the historical ministry of Jesus, the apostolic witness, and the testimony of the Spirit, John wants us to know there is no way to be neutral. God has spoken. We either trust him and believe or else we refuse to believe, which is tantamount to claiming that his testimony is untrue. We cannot, like these false teachers, claim to believe God while rejecting his testimony about his Son. Rudolf Schnackenburg puts it well: “To reject [the testimony of God] is therefore a serious evil, and to oppose it a futile project.”⁷³

5:11 “And” here does not add a new or different idea but rather draws out an implication of the previous verse. Verses 9–10 stated that God has borne witness to the person and work of Jesus. This witness points to God’s gift of eternal life in his Son. Again, John’s point has not been merely abstract theology; rather, as a godly pastor he has been contending for the life of his people, reminding them that eternal life is available only through the Son.

5:12 This verse concludes and draws together what has been said in this section. Since eternal life is found only in the Son, whoever has him has life, while whoever does not have him does not have life. To “have” the Son means to believe in him. Since such faith results in abiding in him and his abiding in the believer, it makes sense to refer to this as “having” the Son.⁷⁴

Response

This section is a bold affirmation of doctrinal truth, with a resounding call to believe that truth. The absolute certainty with which John writes may sound odd or harsh to modern ears that have been trained to think such certainty unbecoming. But if God has spoken, then to be hesitant with his message is inappropriate and suggests an unwillingness to believe him. Furthermore, if his message involves the only way for people to escape eternal doom and instead find life, then clarity

⁷³ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, trans. R. Fuller and I. Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 239.

⁷⁴ John elsewhere refers to “having” the Father (2:23) or God (2 John 9).

and boldness with this message is not callous or harsh but is the most loving thing anyone could do.

John makes clear that there is but one way to eternal life: faith in the crucified Son of God. There is no excuse for dismissing doctrine in favor of good intentions or amorphous faith. God has called us to believe certain things about his Son. Saving faith has doctrinal content. This text also strongly teaches exclusivity, the truth that salvation is found only in Christ. John's writing makes no sense if, in the end, salvation can come by sincere belief in other religions. This truth undergirds the importance and urgency of evangelism and missions.

1 JOHN 5:13–21

¹³I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. ¹⁴And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. ¹⁵And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.

¹⁶If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask, and God¹ will give him life—to those who commit sins that do not lead to death. There is sin that leads to death; I do not say that one should pray for that. ¹⁷All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that does not lead to death.

¹⁸We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.

¹⁹We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

²⁰And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. ²¹Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

¹Greek *he*

Section Overview

This section summarizes the key points of the letter. The opening verse (1 John 5:13) connects the belief discussed in the last section to assurance, the theme of the rest of the section, as seen in the repeated use of “we know” (vv. 15, 18, 19, 20). As those who believe in the Son of God, we are assured of the truths highlighted in this passage. John closes with points of assurance for his dear audience in order to help them persevere. This is an important pastoral point. We need our sins to be rebuked, and we also need to be called to obedience. But the pastor must not

leave us there. Rather, he must point us to the promises of the gospel, which give us a firm place to stand as we seek to persevere.

Section Outline

XV. Summary and Conclusion: Assurance (5:13–21)

- A. Assurance of Eternal Life (5:13)
- B. Assurance of Answered Prayer (5:14–17)
 - 1. Statement of Assurance in Prayer (5:14–15)
 - 2. Specific Example: Prayer for an Erring Brother (5:16–17)
- C. Assurance of Spiritual Protection (5:18)
- D. Assurance of Belonging to God (5:19)
- E. Assurance of the Truth of Jesus (5:20)
- F. Closing Charge (5:21)

Comment

5:13 Using another purpose statement, John summarizes his aim in writing: he writes to provide assurance of eternal life to those who hold fast to faith “in the name of the Son of God.” Throughout this letter, John has been concerned with “eternal life,” and in the previous section he demonstrated how possession of such life depends on believing the full truth about who Jesus is. The whole letter has been concerned to help this congregation hold on to such truth and thus to know that they have eternal life.

The Greek word order puts emphasis on their belief. John is saying, in essence, “I am writing in order to provide you assurance, that is, assurance to those who hold fast to orthodox faith in Jesus.” Any pastor knows the challenge of providing assurance without providing *false* assurance. John makes clear here that the assurance on offer is available only through faith in Jesus.

5:14 Knowing that one has eternal life leads to “confidence” in prayer. John repeats the same basic point from 3:21–22. To say that God “hears” our prayers means he hears favorably, he pays attention with the intent to answer. The prayer he hears in this way is one that is “according to his will.” (Jesus makes similar remarks about prayer in John’s Gospel; cf. John 14:13–14; 15:7, 16; 16:23–27). This qualification keeps us from thinking of God as our cosmic servant, here to perform whatever task we desire.

5:15 John goes on to say that if God “hears” us in this way, he will answer us. Again, the hearing and granting are conditioned upon the request being “according to his will.” The prosperity teachers who suggest we can have all the health and wealth we want, if we would just believe enough, grossly distort this text and others. In the context of this letter, John is seeking to help his readers see God not as a vending machine but as a loving Father to whom they can bring all their concerns and requests. As such a Father, he is attentive to our needs and delights to answer us,

although because he loves us he screens our requests through the filter of his wise awareness of what is best for us.

So, while we must rebuff any abuse of this text, we must also embrace what it does teach. Building on all he has taught concerning mutual abiding in God, and God's deep, adopting love for us, John calls on us to pray and make our requests known to the Father. We ought to pray in boldness, knowing that God will respond to our prayers. Marshall calls such confidence in prayer "one of the most important fruits of Christian assurance."⁷⁵

5:16 John restates another key emphasis of the letter—love for fellow believers—in light of what he has just said about prayer. Thus love for the brothers is expressed in terms of praying for the perseverance of one another. If a believer sees "his brother," a fellow believer, fall into sin, he should pray for him with the aim that God might grant him life, that is, that God might preserve this brother in the faith. The deep value and importance of life together with other believers is implied and assumed here.

However, two key questions remain: (1) What is the "sin that leads to death"? (2) Why does John "not say" we should pray for people committing such sin?

While there has been much discussion about the identity of this "sin that leads to death," we should look for clues within the context of this letter.⁷⁶ John has been particularly concerned throughout the letter with sins that show that one does not have eternal life abiding in him, that is, with sins that do, in fact, lead to death. John has particularly identified such sin as rejection of belief in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God, unwillingness to obey God and pursue holiness, and failure to love fellow believers. Thus, "Sin that leads to death is deliberate refusal to believe in Jesus Christ, to follow God's commands, and to love one's brothers."⁷⁷ This was the behavior of those who were seeking to deceive John's hearers (2:26). This interpretation makes the most sense within the context of the letter.

Therefore, John is not describing a sin that can be committed accidentally or even in a moment. Yet all sin is gradual. No one reaches full degradation overnight. Rather, every sin paves the way for deeper and greater sin. Thus, John calls for believers to pray for one another lest anyone be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (similar to Heb. 3:13) so that he eventually turns away from Christ and goes out from the company of the redeemed, proving that he was never truly saved (1 John 2:19). Marshall's challenging words are apt: "It is not characteristic of the modern church prayer meeting (if we hold one at all) that we pray for specific members who have fallen into sin by name. . . . John's words are a challenge to the quality of our intercession for others."⁷⁸

John tells us to expect such prayer for other believers to be answered: "God will give him life." This is not presumption, but we can pray boldly for one another,

⁷⁵ Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 245.

⁷⁶ For an overview of the main interpretations, cf. Akin, 1, 2, 3 *John*, 208–211.

⁷⁷ Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 248.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 250–251.

knowing that as we pray for the perseverance of the saints, we pray according to God's will (5:15).

Lastly, how should we understand John's counsel regarding those who do commit a sin "leading to death"? In a letter where John has been quite blunt, his words here are very careful, almost hesitant. Notice that he *does not forbid* prayer for those who have committed such sin. He simply notes that he has "not" told us that we "should pray for that" ("I do not say . . ."). His words *leave the door open for us to pray*, and then perhaps at some point to stop praying, without feeling guilty about it.

There came a time when God told Jeremiah to quit praying for his people (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Jesus told his disciples there would be a time to shake from their feet the dust of a city that would not listen (Matt. 10:14). It seems John is acknowledging that people may come to the point beyond which prayer would do no good. However, it is not always clear when this point is reached, so John does not prohibit praying for such individuals. Rather, he gives permission for such praying to cease when the time comes.

5:17 Lest the differentiation between sins seem to downplay the gravity of sins that do not lead to death, John quickly affirms that "all wrongdoing is sin." No sin is acceptable. All sin is rebellion against God (3:4) and qualifies as "unrighteousness" or "wrongdoing." But there is a wide range of sin short of deliberate refusal to believe or obey. Thus, while we maintain the heinousness of sin, we must also maintain the greatness of God's grace and his willingness to forgive. This truth about God is what should animate our prayers for one another.

5:18 Following the discussion of apostasy, this verse not only restates John's teaching on holiness but also offers assurance. Those who have truly been born of God do not continue in sin leading to spiritual death. When we are born of God, we are changed in such a way that we begin to fight sin, as John has already argued.

Those born of God are protected by "he who was born of God." This could possibly refer to a fellow believer, whose prayer protects his fellow brother (cf. v. 16). However, it is perhaps more likely that this refers to Jesus, highlighting the connection between Jesus as the "only Son" and believers as adopted children. Jesus protects the children of God so that the Evil One does not "touch" them. Jesus prayed for and thus protected Peter in a similar way (Luke 22:32).

But what does it mean that Satan cannot "touch" the protected brother? It would seem that Satan "touched" Job in one sense (Job 2:4–8, note the verb "touch" in v. 5). Jesus prayed not for his followers to be taken out of the world but for the Father to "keep" them (John 17:15). What this protection looks like can be deduced by the experience of the one "born of God." Jesus suffered and died but was ultimately resurrected. So also we may suffer and even be killed, but our spiritual life cannot be touched.

5:19 John has been providing his readers with proofs that they are "from God." As he summarizes his message, John tells them directly, in effect, "We have been

through the evidence. We are weak and fail and do stumble. But we believe, obey, and love, and so we are from God.” This affirmation from the apostle must have meant much to this beleaguered congregation.

John reminds his readers that there are two clearly distinct spheres at work in the universe. In contrast to John and his hearers, the world “lies in the power of the evil one.” This is the “world” we are not to love (2:15). In contrast to the life given to believers, these people are under the domination of the Evil One. This should make John’s hearers grateful while protecting them from thinking that in any way those who have departed from the church might be better off.

This also fills out the promise of protection in the previous verse. We know we are protected and that we belong to God, but we also know we currently live in enemy-occupied territory. John wants his audience to be under no illusion about the difficulty of their setting. The ultimate victory is assured, but there will be battles and casualties along the way.

5:20 If people in the world are under the sway of the Devil, how do people move from the “world” to God? Such a transition is possible only because of the coming of Jesus. The incarnation was the divine invasion of the world in order to overthrow the usurper and rescue the people of God.

In his coming, Jesus gave us “understanding” so that we might recognize the reality of who he is. This is the language of grace. We did not in our own wisdom discern the truth of God and thus pursue him. Rather, we too were under the power of the Evil One, but by the work of Christ our eyes were opened, that we might know him (2 Tim. 2:25–26; 2 Cor. 4:3–6). Thus, John’s hearers are reminded that the ultimate reason they “understand” the truth about Jesus, while others have rejected that understanding, is grace.

In this one verse John three times describes Jesus as “true.” The word used here (*alēthinos*) occurs more often in John’s writings than anywhere else in the NT and refers to that which is the ultimate reality. It is most often used of God or Christ, taking on the sense of “divine.”⁷⁹ We have come to know the only one who can be properly called “God.” As Yarbrough points out, “There is perhaps no loftier modifier for John to use as a substantive for the Son.”⁸⁰ Thus, after all the ways in which John has argued for a proper understanding of who Jesus is, he closes with this crescendo: “Jesus, is the true, genuine, real God.” John’s hearers are encouraged to hold fast to this confession despite those who teach otherwise.

5:21 Instead of including a typical letter closing, John provides a final charge. The pastoral tone pervading the letter is sounded once more with the final use of the term of endearment “Little children.” Modern readers may wonder what “idols” are in view.⁸¹ The letter has dealt not with paganism (where images were

79 Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. James Ernest, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 84–85.

80 Yarbrough, 1–3 *John*, 319.

81 For a thorough listing of proposed identities of the “idols,” cf. Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 627–628.

worshiped) but with an aberrant version of Christianity. Most likely, what John has in mind are the false views of God proclaimed by the false teachers who deny Jesus' incarnation, his messiahship, or his status as Son of God. If we worship as god any being that is not the triune God of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are guilty of idolatry. John closes by urging his beloved hearers to hold fast to the one true God and to worship him only.

Response

As I write this, my wife and two of my sons are in Africa sharing the gospel in an impoverished area. At one house my wife asked a man if they could pray for him. He said, "Pray for God to give me a job, and, if he does, I will believe in him." While happy to pray for a job for this man, my wife pointed out that he was in no position to barter with God over his soul. Indeed, God may intend to use his joblessness to bring him to faith. This account illustrates a very common misconception of God and prayer. John is not saying that prayer (or even faith) is a tool we can use to get things from God. Instead, if we remember the flow of the letter, with its discussion of love of God and abiding in him, we can see that John is referring to confidence that, because of Jesus, we can be God's children. Our heavenly Father wants to bless and care for his children. But because he loves us, he will not give us things that will harm us. Thus we are encouraged to come and ask, trusting that every good thing we ask for he will grant.

(See Bibliography at end of commentary on 3 John)

2 JOHN

Ray Van Neste

INTRODUCTION TO 2 JOHN

(See 1 John: Introduction to 1–3 John)

Overview

Second John largely addresses the interconnectedness of truth and love. The introduction (vv. 1–3) previews these two themes, which then run throughout the brief letter. In verses 4–6, John stresses that those who walk in the truth obey the command to love one another. In verses 7–11 he discusses the danger of those who distort the truth, before concluding the short epistle in verses 12–13.

Outline

- I. Greeting (vv. 1–3)
- II. Message (vv. 4–11)
 - A. Walking in Truth and Love (vv. 4–6)
 - B. Those Who Oppose the Truth (vv. 7–11)
- III. Closing (vv. 12–13)

2 JOHN 1–3

¹The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, ²because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever:

³Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love.

Section Overview

Using the standard form for beginning a letter in the Hellenistic world, John greets the church to which he writes, establishing the twin themes of the letter: truth and love. Gospel truth grounds and promotes mutual love between John, this church, and other believers.

Section Outline

I. Greeting (vv. 1–3)

Comment

1 John refers to himself simply as “the elder.” As noted in the Introduction to 1–3 John, some argue that this suggests the author is someone other than the apostle John. However, elsewhere in the NT, Peter also refers to himself as an “elder” (1 Pet. 5:1), and thus such usage by an apostle is not unknown. “Elder” is the most common NT term for the pastoral office, and thus John is identifying himself particularly by this pastoral role.

The “elect lady” to whom John writes could be either a literal woman or a church referred to figuratively. Most commentators believe that John refers here to a church and its members (“her children”), using imagery common to the Bible. Through both Testaments the people of God are often referred to as a woman or bride (Isa. 54:6; 62:5; Jer. 2:2; 3:1; Ezekiel 23; Hosea 2; Eph. 5:22–31; Rev. 22:17). In 1 John, John regularly referred to believers as “children,” as he does now in 2 John. Thus John uses common biblical imagery to address a local church.

2 The emphasis in this greeting is on love and truth. John loves this church “in truth,” and all who “know the truth” love this church as well (v. 1). Furthermore, the reason for this love is “the truth that abides” in believers (v. 2). Even the “grace, mercy, and peace” that come to believers from God are “in truth and love” (v. 3). This repetition can seem dizzying to modern readers, but the emphasis on and interconnectedness of love and truth is clear. John’s statement that he loves this

church “in truth” could simply mean “truly” or “sincerely.” However, considering the other uses of “truth” here, it seems likely that more is intended. John’s love is “in the truth,” that is, rooted in the gospel truth they hold in common. This is why all who know the truth also love this church.

Shared commitment to the gospel produces love. This is what verse 2 makes clear, stating that the basis of such love is “the truth.” Thus, truth (the gospel) is the basis for Christian unity and love. We cannot increase our love for one another by downplaying truth. Rather, holding to core gospel truths and our shared allegiance to them is what will increase our love for fellow believers. Since this truth abides and will be with us forever, our love also will abide and persevere. Christian love is based not on our performance or ability but on the truth of the gospel.

3 Hellenistic letters typically included a health wish in their greetings. John does something similar here, pronouncing a gospel blessing that “will be with us.” While “grace, mercy, and peace” is a fairly conventional triad in Christian writing, the terms are not as common in John. He is pronouncing God’s covenant blessings on his people, reminding them of God’s willingness to pardon their sin and of their favorable relationship with God.¹

Response

This text strongly emphasizes Christian love and fellowship. Since “all who know the truth” are said to love the specific church in view here, we should understand that all Christians should love every church that knows and upholds the truth of the gospel. Failure to love others who hold fast to the gospel exposes a failure to truly grasp that gospel.

Too easily, people separate love and truth. Some say they love people too much to be too concerned with doctrinal error. They see it as unloving to discriminate between true and false teaching. Others affirm the importance of doctrinal precision but fail to express the love for other believers this doctrine should produce. Either end of this spectrum is a grave error. There is no “either/or” in this arena, no room for considering it safer to err in one direction or the other. The interconnectedness of love and truth shown here is crucial for Christian living and witness.

¹ Robert Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 336.

2 JOHN 4–6

⁴I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. ⁵And now I ask you, dear lady—not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. ⁶And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

Section Overview

John commends the love demonstrated by this church and urges them to continue in it. He continues to show how love and truth are intertwined by defining love as obedience to God's commands, which are truth.

Section Outline

- II. Message (vv. 4–11)
 - A. Walking in Truth and Love (vv. 4–6)

Comment

⁴ As noted above, “your children” refers to members of the church to which John writes. He has received word that members of this church were faithfully living in obedience to the commands of God, and he rejoiced greatly in this news. Not only does sharing in the truth cause Christians to love one another; it also grants them deep joy in one another's obedience. In the previous section, John said that if we love the truth, we love people who believe that truth. Now John states that if we love truth, we love to see people live in accordance with that truth.

⁵ To walk in truth, i.e., in accordance with God's commands, requires loving fellow believers. Almost certainly John refers here to the teaching of Jesus recorded in John's Gospel (John 13:34–35). This is “not . . . a new commandment” for the recipients but is one they have heard from the earliest days of their Christian experience. This command is even rooted in the old covenant (e.g., Lev. 19:18). Thus this command to love fellow believers goes back to the beginning of their Christian experience and, in fact, back even further to the beginning of Scripture.

⁶ As is common for John, he does not leave love undefined. A misunderstanding of love is not unique to today; it has been common throughout human history.

Proper love is shaped and informed by the commands of God. To love another person is to do what God commands us to do (or not do) in regard to them and is to help them obey God's commands. Any action toward the other person that violates God's commands—no matter how well intended or how romantically inclined—is not love. Any action that encourages or helps that person to avoid obedience to God's commands—no matter how nice the motivation—is not love.

Some understand “the commandment” in the latter half of verse 6 to refer back to the love command (v. 5). However, it seems best to understand this as referring more generally to the fact that Christianity has a basic, nonnegotiable command structure (referred to in v. 4). From the beginning of their Christian experience, John's readers have known that God commands and expects obedience. This reminder of the necessity of obedience sets up the discussion of false teachers, which follows in the next section.

Response

Loving fellow believers is central to the gospel. Real love for truth always leads to love for others who likewise love the truth. Furthermore, this love among believers should lead us to rejoice greatly in the obedience of other believers. Does the faithfulness of other believers move you to deep joy? If not, your loves are out of order. This deep affection for one another, and the resulting pleasure in one another's obedience, is what creates a thriving church community where people care for, help, and encourage one another, seeking our joy in obedience to God.

Additionally, John's pastoral joy comes not from some sort of recognition from others but from the faithful obedience of his people. If pastors find their satisfaction in recognition by the broader world (culturally or denominationally), they will focus on what outsiders see or hear. If we derive our satisfaction from the faithful obedience of our people, however, our gaze will be settled more upon them, producing interest in and concern for their daily lives. Thus counseling, caring, discipling, and spending time with them will no longer be a hindrance from “more important work” but will be a pathway to joy.

This text is vital in a day in which many declare it to be unloving to name sin as sin, a day in which many define love as indulgence, simply letting people do as they please. It is loving to affirm people in obedience, to call people to obedience, and to rebuke disobedience. As Matthew Henry stated, “It is a sign that our friends are faithful indeed if, in love to our souls, they will not suffer sin upon us, nor let us alone in it.”² Of course, this rebuke should be given graciously, but if we fail to give it, we fail to love.

The reality of grace does not negate the necessity of obedience. Some well-meaning people claim that “Christianity is not about rules but about relationship.” This phrase, however, is misguided. One cannot read the NT long without realizing that commands and rules occur frequently. God is King and therefore has every

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, new modern ed., 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 3:779.

right to tell his creatures how to live. We err seriously when suggesting that rules and relationships do not go together. In fact, any healthy relationship includes rules. Of course, Christianity is not merely a list of rules; it is a relationship—a relationship with God the Father Almighty, whose commands must be obeyed.

2 JOHN 7–11

⁷For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. ⁸Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we¹ have worked for, but may win a full reward. ⁹Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

¹Some manuscripts *you*

Section Overview

This section contains the central concern of the letter: avoiding the lure of false teachers. John desires his hearers to know that such deceivers always exist, and so we must be on guard. The remedy to false teaching is to hold fast to faithful doctrine (“the teaching of Christ”) and to have no part in supporting such false teachers.

Section Outline

II. Message (vv. 4–11) . . .

B. Those Who Oppose Truth (vv. 7–11)

Comment

⁷ The reason John’s readers must continue in obedience and love for one another is the presence of “many deceivers” in the world, who will try to beguile them. Believers need to persevere in love for one another so that they may help protect one another from these evil influences.

John notes that there are “many” such false teachers, and, indeed, false teaching features prominently throughout the NT. The specific false teachers in view here deny the incarnation. They are Grinches seeking to steal Christmas. Some have suggested that these were early Gnostics, but we do not know the full content of their teaching. A denial of the incarnation would seem to downplay the full humanity

of Christ. We should see that any deviation from full biblical Christology leads to false teaching. This is not merely an academic issue. The salvation promised in Christ, the loving fellowship he creates, and the future hope we await all depend on Jesus' being who the Scriptures claim him to be. Anyone who distorts the biblical portrait of the person of Christ is a "deceiver" and is literally anti-Christ.

8 "Watch yourselves," a plural imperative, is a call for the church community as a whole to watch out for each of its members. Guarding against deception is not only a pastoral duty but also the duty of each member of the flock. While pastors lead the work of overseeing souls (Heb. 13:17), all members play a part. Perseverance is a community project.

The key concern in this verse is the potential result of failing to be vigilant. John is clearly concerned that his readers persevere in the faith and thus show themselves to be true believers (1 John 2:18–20). He has worked so that they might understand the gospel, repent and believe, and persevere in the faith. If they turn away from the gospel to false teaching, they will show themselves to be unbelievers and thus squander what John and others within the church have worked for. John desires them to persevere and thus win the full reward of their faith on the final day. The use of "reward" (*misthos*) ought not concern us. Jesus and the apostles commonly used this language to refer to the eternal benefits of trusting Christ and persevering in that faith and in the good deeds it produces (e.g., Luke 6:23; John 4:36; 1 Cor. 3:8, 14; Rev. 22:12).

9 This verse clarifies further that John is concerned for the eternal salvation of his readers. Those who embrace the teaching of the deceivers and thus fail to "abide in the teaching of Christ" do not have God. They are not believers. Abiding, or "remaining," points to persevering in proper doctrine. Abandoning this doctrine is here described as "[going] on ahead." These false teachers are overly progressive. Not content with orthodox teaching, they "advance" into heresy.

John makes clear that one cannot have the Father without the Son. If one abandons the proper teaching concerning the Son, he cannot have the Father, but if he holds fast to the right understanding of the Son, he has both Father and Son (on "having" God, cf. comment on 1 John 5:12).

10–11 Because false teaching is so serious—with the potential to damn souls—we must not support it in any way. Traveling teachers in the ancient world were able to do their work only as people took them into their homes, providing food and shelter. In 3 John, John encourages the church to provide this support for orthodox teachers, but here he tells Christians they must *not* support *heretical* teachers. The greeting prohibited here is not a casual "hello" but a Christian greeting that would denote acceptance and prayer for God's blessing. This is not a call to be uncivil or rude; rather, it is a call for clarity as to who is, and who is not, recognized as a fellow Christian. To encourage or support false teachers is to participate in their "wicked works" of deceiving people, leading to their damnation.

Response

The NT is clear concerning the necessity of perseverance. True faith, though it may waver, continues. Believers must, then, be wary of false teaching while holding fast to faithful doctrine and to one another. Grasping the reality of this call to perseverance will help Christians understand why the Bible places such importance on our need of the church and of faithful soul-care within it. These are God's ordained means for enabling us to persevere. No one ought to expect to persevere in the faith while neglecting these resources.

We must, like John, be willing to identify false teaching that compromises the gospel. We must not regard everyone who disagrees with us as false teachers, but we must resist any who distort the biblical understanding of the person of Christ. No true shepherd will ignore the presence of wolves near his flock, nor be content with general warnings. Care for the flock requires direct, explicit warning as well as instruction.

Verses 10–11 do not imply that believers cannot reach out to people of other faiths or have them into their homes. Believers can and should reach out to unbelievers in this way. What they must not do is give aid, encouragement, or monetary support to any who teach an aberrant view of the gospel. Believers must be diligent and careful when supporting any ministry. They should investigate what such ministries teach and seek guidance from a faithful pastor.

2 JOHN 12–13

¹²Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

¹³The children of your elect sister greet you.

Section Overview

In a simple conclusion to the letter, John again expresses his affection for this congregation and his hope to follow this letter with a personal visit.

Section Outline

III. Closing (vv. 12–13)

Comment

12 John uses the technology available to him to communicate with the people under his care, but nothing compares with personal, face-to-face interaction. This

is what he longs for. The purpose of John's communication by letter and in person is the joy that he and his people will share. This is a pastor's heart—longing for the joy of his people, sharing that joy, and knowing that such joy will be found in conformity with the truths of Christ.

13 "Elect sister" refers to another church, one at which John is stationed at the time of writing, just as "elect lady" in verse 1 refers to the church to which he is writing. As in 3 John, John is concerned with sharing greetings, thus fostering relationships between churches.

Response

The goal of a pastor's labor with his people and of interaction between church members is shared joy in Christ (v. 4). Knowing that obedience to the Word of God is the path to joy, Christians must encourage one another in this obedience, so that they might know the joy of Christ. Like John, we must make use of whatever means available to interact with and help other believers, knowing all the while that nothing compares with real physical presence. The completion of our joy, that is, our perseverance in the faith, will be best served by regular face-to-face interactions with a faithful church community.

(See Bibliography at end of commentary on 3 John)

3 JOHN

Ray Van Neste

INTRODUCTION TO 3 JOHN

(See 1 John: Introduction to 1–3 John)

Overview

Third John is the shortest book of the NT.¹ This brief letter is built around John's description of three men: Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius. Gaius, the recipient of the letter, is commended and serves as a positive example of faithfulness, particularly in his support of faithful traveling preachers. Diotrephes is a negative counterexample, being arrogant, rebellious, and divisive. Most likely, the behavior of Diotrephes is the primary occasion of the letter. With the mention of Demetrius, John returns briefly to a positive example before closing the letter. These are real people, but they serve as examples as well, supporting John's call not to imitate evil but to imitate good (v. 11).

Outline

- I. Greeting (vv. 1–4)
- II. Body (vv. 5–12)
 - A. Commendation for Support of Missionaries (vv. 5–8)
 - B. Critique of Diotrephes (vv. 9–10)
 - C. Demetrius and Imitation (vv. 11–12)
- III. Letter Closing (vv. 13–15)

¹ Although 3 John has more verses than 2 John, it has fewer words.

3 JOHN 1–4

¹The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

²Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. ³For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers¹ came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

¹Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters*; also verses 5, 10

Overview

In keeping with the standard letter greeting of the time, John greets Gaius. John’s concern with the interconnectedness of love and truth is stated clearly. John identifies himself as a pastor (“elder”), and his pastoral heart is evident.

Section Outline

I. Greeting (vv. 1–4)

Comment

1 John identifies himself simply as “the elder,” as he did in 2 John, highlighting his pastoral role. More striking is his repetition of terms for love in regard to Gaius. He is “beloved” and one “whom I love in truth.” Then, three more times in the letter Gaius is addressed as “Beloved” (vv. 2, 5, 11). Some translations render this Greek word (*agapētos*) as “dear friend,” but this is too weak, even if “beloved” is less commonly used today. There is no need to see these terms as mere formality, particularly in these letters that stress so often the importance of Christian love. John not only urges deep love for fellow believers—he also exemplifies it.

We do not know anything about Gaius beyond what is mentioned in this letter. This was a common name, and it is unlikely that this is the same Gaius mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:14 and Romans 16:23. John says he loves Gaius “in truth.” As noted in 2 John, “in truth” conveys the sincerity of John’s love, but even more it shows that the love shared between these friends is rooted in the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. Real friendship is always rooted in a common bond, whether fleeting or significant. This friendship is rooted in ultimate truth.

2 A health wish or prayer was common in the opening of Greco-Roman letters, as it still is in letters today. John prays for good health and overall well-being for Gaius

in keeping with the health of Gaius's soul. The word translated "soul" here (*psychē*) refers not to the immaterial in contrast to the material but to the whole of life. In Christian usage this would include one's relationship with God. Thus, John prays for Gaius's health and well-being in all aspects of life. This comprehensiveness in prayer is helpful in light of imbalances that are all too common. Some prosperity teachers have seized on this verse as supporting the idea that faithful Christians should expect good health at all times. Such is a terrible misreading of this verse, as well as the rest of Scripture, particularly since we rest our faith on the suffering of an innocent Messiah.

3 Some fellow believers ("brothers") have told John about Gaius's faithful living. As elsewhere in John's letters, "truth" is not merely an *idea* but is something to be *lived*. Gaius's "truth" mentioned here refers to his behavior, as is clarified by the following phrase, "walking in the truth." Gaius is living in accord with the truths proclaimed in Christianity. This causes John to "rejoice greatly." All who truly love God's truth find great joy in seeing others live out this truth.

4 John says it is his greatest joy to hear that his "children" (believers he has pastored and instructed) are living faithfully. This is the heart of a pastor, and it should be the heart of every believer. If we love people and love God's truth, we will rejoice greatly when people live out this truth.

Response

Some Christians today think it is somehow "less spiritual" to pray for physical health as compared to "more spiritual" matters. In response to those who seem to pray for nothing other than the latest surgery, some believers long to pray for deeper things. John gives us a good example of praying for health and well-being. We need not try to be "more spiritual" than the Bible. On the other hand, John's example pushes us to include all of life in our prayers, praying for ourselves and others, that our souls may prosper as well.

Verses 3–4 are a beautiful portrait of a pastor. Just as parents take great pride and joy in the maturing of their children, so pastors take great joy in the faithful living of those they serve. They cannot be content with simply the production of sermons or the building of "ministries" or fame; instead they find deepest joy in the spiritual well-being of individuals to whom they minister.

3 JOHN 5–8

⁵Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

Section Overview

One of the evidences that Gaius is “walking in the truth” (v. 3) is that he supports those who are sent out by the churches to preach the gospel in other regions. In affirming Gaius’s practice, John demonstrates the propriety and importance of supporting faithful missionaries.

Section Outline

II. Body (vv. 5–12)

A. Commendation for Support of Missionaries (vv. 5–8)

Comment

5 This section now elaborates on the specific behavior of Gaius that has led to his commendation by John. Gaius has been supporting fellow believers (“brothers”) who “have gone out for the sake of the name” (v. 7), that is, they have served as traveling preachers or missionaries. Although these men were believers, they were not personally known to Gaius (“strangers as they are”). But this did not prevent Gaius from supporting them, demonstrating that his efforts were rooted not in familiarity but in commitment to the spread of the gospel.

6 In the first century, traveling teachers were dependent on the hospitality of churches to provide housing and food in order to complete their task. This was seen in the warning in 2 John 10 against supporting unorthodox teachers. The *Didache* (a late-first- or early-second-century document) seeks to aid Christians in differentiating between faithful teachers who ought to be supported and false teachers or opportunists who seek to take advantage of such hospitality. Gaius has rightly discerned that the brothers in view here are faithful teachers, and he has demonstrated Christian love by supporting them.

This is one of the most significant passages in the NT concerning missionary support. The “brothers” in view here have been sent to preach the gospel (“for

the sake of the name”). John affirms the work of supporting such servants of the gospel. Care and support given to them is referred to as “love,” because love, for John (and for the rest of the NT authors), is affection that leads to the meeting of needs. These traveling preachers had reported back to the church about the support and care given by Gaius.

John commends the support of such workers, telling Gaius he will do well to support them “in a manner worthy of God.” This is a striking standard for missionary support! It was common in the ancient world (as in many places today) to expect a messenger to be treated as if he were the one who sent him. Thus, those who go out for the sake of preaching the message of Jesus should be supported in a manner worthy of Jesus himself. This obviously rules out any halfhearted, ham-fisted approach to support and instead calls for glad, gracious generosity of the sort the Macedonian churches had demonstrated and Paul had praised (2 Cor. 8:1–5).

7 The reason these people should be given such strong support is that they “have gone out for the sake of the name.” One’s “name” refers to one’s reputation and character. These brothers have left behind familiar settings of home in order to spread the fame of the name of Jesus. Their labors are not for their own glorification (their names are not even mentioned) but for the exalting of Jesus. The body of Christ should support efforts exalting Christ. Efforts to exalt man, however, have no right to the support of God’s people.

John states that these preachers accepted “nothing from the Gentiles.” The term here translated “Gentiles” is not the typical word translated “Gentiles” elsewhere in the NT (*ethnos*). It is instead a word (*ethnikos*) that, while still referring to an outsider status, emphasizes that which is “*unbelieving, worldly, polytheistic*.”² These gospel servants did not look to unbelievers to support their ministries. The children of God ought not look to the Devil’s house for support of their work—it is the church’s job to support gospel ministries.

8 This verse draws together the point of the paragraph. Gaius has been commended for supporting faithful traveling preachers, and John makes clear his application that “we” all “ought to support” such people. John also adds a final motivation for this support: by supporting them we become “fellow workers for the truth.” Supporters share in the work of those whom they support (just as in 2 John 11, where those who support heretical teachers share in their sin). Those who love the truth seek to work for it, and can do so by taking that truth to new areas or by supporting those who do.

Response

John sets a high standard indeed, and one that bears some pondering when churches consider their participation with missionaries in terms of money,

² BDAG, s.v. ἔθνικός, italics original.

engagement, encouragement, and prayer. The church is to support this mission work and not to expect the world to do so. John's teaching is not intended to prevent an *unbeliever* from supporting a well-digging or other humanitarian project led by Christians, but it is telling *the church* to shoulder the responsibility of taking the gospel to the nations. As we support those who go out to proclaim the gospel, we have a hand in the work that is done. This is an appeal to gospel-rooted self-interest, the desire to be a part of as much kingdom work as we can in the short lives that we have. We can multiply our impact by supporting others.

3 JOHN 9–10

⁹I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

Section Overview

In contrast to the positive example of Gaius, John describes the wickedness of Diotrephes, who is opposing John's authority and disrupting the faithful work of the church.

Section Outline

- II. Body (vv. 5–12) . . .
 - B. Critique of Diotrephes (vv. 9–10)

Comment

⁹ Diotrephes does not demonstrate love but rather “refuses to welcome the brothers” (v. 10). John has written to the church where Gaius and Diotrephes are both members, but it seems that Diotrephes has prevented the letter from being read. In Diotrephes, the infection of personal ambition has swollen into rebellion.

The first thing said about Diotrephes is that he “likes to put himself first” (v. 9). This is a striking description of arrogance. We do not know the substance of the disagreement between John and Diotrephes, but such selfish ambition is enough to cause trouble. Scripture is clear about God's distaste for human pride. In the list in Proverbs 6:16–17 of things the Lord hates, “haughty eyes” heads the list, and wisdom later declares, “Pride and arrogance . . . I hate” (Prov. 8:13). Furthermore, “Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he

will not go unpunished” (Prov. 16:5). Diotrephes’s self-absorption has made him a hindrance to the church and an opponent of the apostle John.

Diotrephes’s arrogance has led to rebellion, as John reports that he “does not acknowledge our authority.” Diotrephes is now willing to disregard the authority of John—an apostle, one of the Twelve (and among the inner circle of three), one who was at the crucifixion, who visited the empty tomb, and who talked with the risen Christ.

10 Diotrephes’s arrogance and rebellion also led to slander, as he was “talking wicked nonsense against” John (“us” could be an “editorial plural” for John or might include Gaius and others who were in agreement with John). To resist proper authority almost always requires speaking evil against that authority, heedless of the warning of Proverbs 10:18: “Whoever utters slander is a fool.”

Lastly, Diotrephes foments division in the church not only by refusing hospitality to faithful teachers but also by preventing others from providing such hospitality and by driving out those who, like Gaius, seek to engage in this “faithful” work (cf. 3 John 5). While the NT affirms the importance of proper church discipline even to the point of excommunication (1 Corinthians 5), Diotrephes is abusing this practice by putting out people who are seeking to be faithful. Diotrephes is the forebear of those who act as if they “own” the church and can operate it according to their own ideas or desires. Such leaders will not fare well when eventually confronted by the true Lord of the church.

As the representative of the Lord of the church, John is prepared to confront Diotrephes upon his visit (cf. also 3 John 14). He is prepared to deal directly and firmly with one who is harming the church by his opposition to the truth. When John comes, he will not ignore Diotrephes in hopes that he will do better; rather, he will “bring up what he is doing.” John will call attention to the wicked actions of Diotrephes and call him to repentance. True love does not indulge wrongdoing but is always in accord with truth, desiring what is best for others and calling them to align with that same truth.

Response

One of the insidious things about pride is how it blinds us to its power. As wrong as Diotrephes’s actions clearly are to us, we nevertheless emulate him whenever we disregard the plain teaching of the NT, for the NT is the apostolic teaching handed down to us. Refusing to acknowledge proper authority is a common issue in the Western church today, to the extent that many do not even recognize the church as having any authority. Yet, Hebrews 13:17 clearly commands, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” We would do well to examine ourselves honestly to see if we are submitting willingly to proper authority.

3 JOHN 11–12

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹² Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

Section Overview

In contrast to wicked Diotrephes, John commends the example of Demetrius. John stresses the importance of finding good examples to emulate.

Section Outline

II. Body (vv. 5–12) . . .

C. Demetrius and Imitation (vv. 11–12)

Comment

11 John returns his attention to Gaius, again addressing him as “beloved.” The call not to imitate evil is an encouragement to avoid responding with evil to the evil of Diotrephes. Gaius must not stoop to his level. “Doing good” refers here to faithful living, which is one’s proper response to the gospel. The NT is clear that while salvation is not earned by works, it always *results in* good works. Therefore, those who, rather than doing good, live lives marked by evil “[have] not seen God”—they have not come to saving knowledge of him.

12 Immediately after commending “good” and those who do good, John introduces another faithful brother, Demetrius. It seems likely that Demetrius was tasked by God with delivering this letter to Gaius. It was common, in the body of ancient letters, to commend the letter-bearer to the letter’s recipient, because the one bringing the letter often played a key role in interpreting the letter as well.³ With testimony from three sources, John assures Gaius that Demetrius can be trusted. First, “everyone” (believers in the location from which John writes) commends him. Demetrius has the full commendation of the local church. Second, the “truth itself,” that is, the gospel, commends Demetrius. For the gospel to commend someone means that person’s life conforms to the truths of the gospel. This is similar to John’s statement earlier that Gaius is “walking in the truth” (v. 3). This also means that Demetrius passes the test of verse 11—his life is marked by obedi-

³ Cf. E. R. Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 207–209.

ence (“good”), and thus he is “from God.” Lastly, John himself (“we”), the apostolic witness, commends Demetrius.

Response

The temptation to respond to evil with evil is terribly common, and, far too often, seductively compelling. It is easy to convince ourselves that we must resort to evil in order to combat evil, but this line of reasoning fails to trust that God will eventually judge all evil. The Bible regularly commands us to leave such judgment to God and to carry on with doing what is right. As people who are “from God,” we must be faithful in doing good, despite what is done to us—lest we become evildoers ourselves.

This text also touches on the importance of good models for imitation. We do not learn merely in the abstract; as a matter of course, humans cannot help but imitate that which is around them. We must offer good models to ourselves, our children, and our church. We do so, of course, by engaging in life with godly saints. We can also do so by reading biographies and writings of faithful men and women who have gone before us.

3 JOHN 13–15

¹³I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. ¹⁴I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

¹⁵Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name.

Section Overview

John closes his letter with standard greetings infused with Christian elements, stating his desire to see Gaius.

Section Outline

III. Letter Closing (vv. 13–15)

Comment

13–14 John’s high regard for direct personal interaction is striking. That is not to say that written communication should be avoided; after all, it is only because the Spirit prompted John to write that this letter has become part of the NT canon. The key point in this verse is John’s pastoral concern and love for those to whom he writes.

15 “Peace” here refers not only to the absence of conflict (though no doubt it contains hope for resolution with Diotrephes) but also includes “God’s covenant blessing, protection, and provision in all its fullness.”⁴

John gives and extends greetings, fostering connections between believers in different churches. The use of “friends” as a designation for other believers is uncommon in the NT; here it highlights the love John encourages among believers. Continuing the theme of personal care, John calls for the friends to be greeted “each by name” (*kat’ onoma*).

Response

John is no aloof pastor checking items off a list so he can get on with more important or interesting matters. Here is a busy pastor dealing with controversy in a way that clearly demonstrates his love and care for individuals in the church. He can communicate from a distance and does so, but he longs to see them, to be in their presence. Then he can really discern how they are faring and ensure that he is doing everything possible for their well-being. Furthermore, the church is not merely a collective group to him. He asks for them to be greeted “by name.” It is doubtful whether people can be pastored merely as a group, as if a pastor could oversee souls if he does not even know their names.

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JUDE

Matthew S. Harmon

INTRODUCTION TO JUDE

Overview

The book of Jude's brevity, focus on false teaching, and strange references to non-biblical Jewish literature could lead modern readers to skim quickly past this book in search of more immediately applicable passages. But Jude's call "to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1) in the face of false teaching is the task of the church in every generation.

Author

The name Jude/Judas was common in the first century, but the author further identifies himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James" (v. 1). This James is almost certainly the leader of the Jerusalem church and half brother of Jesus. Therefore, Jude is also a half brother of Jesus (Matt. 13:55).¹ He likely refrains from calling himself the brother of Jesus out of humility and a desire to avoid the appearance of claiming special authority based on his biological rather than spiritual relationship to Jesus.

While some in the early church questioned which Jude wrote the letter, no one doubted its authenticity. Those who rejected its canonical status did so because it used apocryphal sources.² Today many critical scholars conclude, because of its excellent Greek style, that it is pseudonymous—written by someone else in order to deceive its recipients into thinking Jude wrote it. Critics assert that a Galilean craftsman could not have produced such a well-written letter. But such a claim underestimates the Greek proficiency Jude could have acquired as an itinerant missionary as well as the possibility that he used a scribe in writing the letter.³ Thus there are no substantive reasons to doubt that Jude the half brother of Jesus wrote it.⁴

Date and Occasion

The letter itself provides little help in determining its date. As a younger half brother of Jesus, Jude could have lived late into the first century. But if Peter used Jude as a source for 2 Peter, Jude must be dated no later than the mid-60s, since

¹ Cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 5–133.

² Gene L. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 5–6.

³ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

⁴ See further Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 404–408.

Peter was executed by Nero around that time. The letter could have been written as early as the mid-40s. Beyond this 20-year window, we cannot be more specific.

Although Jude writes to a specific church or group of churches, he does not identify them. Perhaps their most likely location is in a Gentile city somewhere in Palestine, such as Sepphoris or Tiberias, though in truth they could be anywhere in the Mediterranean world.⁵ Since Jude expects the recipients to be familiar with not only the OT but also Jewish apocryphal literature, they are likely Jewish Christians, or perhaps a mixture of Jews and Gentiles.

Sometime after the churches' initial founding by someone within the apostolic circle (Jude 17–18), false teachers had infiltrated them. Basing their authority on dreams, these outsiders engaged in sexual immorality and were motivated by greed. They rejected the authority of God and perhaps even that of leaders in the church. As a result, the false teachers caused division in the church, luring the vulnerable to join them in their immorality.

Genre and Literary Features

Jude is an “epistolary sermon,” a hybrid genre that embeds sermon-like material into the main body of a letter.⁶ It is a real letter, addressed to a specific group of people facing a specific threat from specific false teachers. However, this identification as an “epistolary sermon” helps explain why the letter’s conclusion lacks the usual personal greetings and instead contains a doxology.

Jude uses a variety of literary devices. He favors vivid metaphors, especially those drawn from nature. OT examples and imagery are among his favorite tools to illustrate a point, and he even draws from other Jewish literature when it helps his cause (see Interpretive Challenges). Jude also employs several triads, such as mercy, peace, and love (v. 2); sets of three OT examples (vv. 5–7, 11); the Trinity (vv. 20–21); and faith, hope (“waiting”), and love (vv. 20–21).⁷ Jude’s “terse, picturesque, and impassioned style, propensity for the use of triplets, and use of OT and extrabiblical sources, in addition to the imagery, poetic rhythm, and abundance of *hapax legomena* . . . make Jude distinct among the writings of the NT.”⁸ Whether Jude’s good Greek style reflects a Hellenistic education or the help of a skilled scribe is uncertain.

Interpreting OT and Jewish tradition is a significant element of the letter. After introducing such texts, Jude transitions to his interpretation of the narratives they contain using the words “these people” (vv. 8; cf. 10, 12, 16). He also varies his verb tenses, usually introducing the text in the aorist tense and his interpretation of it in the present tense. Jude uses these texts typologically, seeing the biblical events not merely as historical incidents but also as patterns prefiguring the actions and fate of the false teachers.

On the relationship between Jude and 2 Peter, see Introduction to 2 Peter: Genre and Literary Features.

5 Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 17–23.

6 Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 3.

7 See further J. Daryl Charles, “Literary Artifice in the Epistle of Jude,” *ZNW* 82 (1991): 122–123.

8 *Ibid.*, 111. *Hapax legomena* are words that occur just once in the Greek NT.

Theology of Jude

GOD

All three members of the Trinity are mentioned. The Father shows us love and grace but also judges the ungodly. Jesus saved Israel from Egypt, yet later he destroyed those who did not believe. On the last day, he will show his people mercy. The Holy Spirit empowers our prayers so that we can keep ourselves in the love of God.

HUMANITY

Apart from Christ, people are ungodly; their lives are oriented toward themselves rather than toward God. This ungodliness manifests itself in sexual immorality, rebellion against God's authority, and greed. As a result, God's judgment awaits them.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Believers are "kept for Jesus Christ" (v. 1) yet they must keep themselves in the love of God. They do so by building themselves up in the faith, praying in the Spirit, and waiting for Christ's mercy on the last day. In the meantime, believers show mercy to those around them, confident in God's power to keep them from stumbling.

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

Jude reminds us that as believers living between the cross and the new creation, we must persevere in the truth of the gospel. Earlier events in Scripture are types that instruct us as we await our appearance before the Lord on the last day.

Preaching from Jude

In every generation, Christians must contend for the truth of the gospel and resist false teaching. Preaching from Jude provides opportunity to stress both God's power to keep his people and our responsibility to keep ourselves in God's love. Jude also instructs believers concerning their response to false teachers and those influenced by them.

Interpretive Challenges

The most obvious challenge is Jude's use of Jewish traditions not found in Scripture. He draws material from *1 Enoch* (Jude 6, 14–15) and likely from the *Assumption of Moses* (Jude 9). This does not mean that Jude considered these works to be Scripture. Paul quotes from secular prophets because the words he quotes are true, not because those works are scriptural (Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12). Jude likewise uses these writings because in these specific instances they say true things. Jude never refers to these writings as "Scripture" (*graphē*), nor does he introduce them with a citation formula such as "as it is written." By the first century AD, the OT canon was essentially fixed, and neither of these Jewish writings was accepted as canonical.⁹ Jude likely cited these traditions because his recipients were already familiar with them.

⁹ See Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

Outline¹⁰

- I. Greeting (vv. 1–2)
- II. Purpose of the Letter (vv. 3–4)
- III. Description and Condemnation of False Teachers (vv. 5–16)
 - A. False Teachers Are Destined for Condemnation (vv. 5–10)
 - B. False Teachers Live Ungodly Lives (vv. 11–13)
 - C. False Teachers Will Be Judged on the Last Day (vv. 14–16)
- IV. Stay True to the Gospel (vv. 17–23)
 - A. Remember the Apostolic Warnings (vv. 17–19)
 - B. Keep Yourselves in the Love of God (vv. 20–21)
 - C. Show Mercy to Those in Trouble (vv. 22–23)
- V. Doxology (vv. 24–25)

JUDE 1–2

¹Jude, a servant¹ of Jesus Christ and brother of James,
 To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for² Jesus
 Christ:

²May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.

¹For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface ²Or by

Section Overview

Following the custom of ancient letter writers, Jude identifies himself as the author and describes his recipients before wishing for God to multiply mercy, peace, and love to them.

Section Outline

- I. Greeting (vv. 1–2)

Comment

¹ Jude identifies himself by his relationship to two people. First, he is “a servant of Jesus Christ.” The word “servant” (*doulos*) can also be translated “slave”; it signifies a relationship in which someone is under the complete authority and control of another. This term was used throughout redemptive history as a designation for key leaders in God’s plan, such as Moses, Joshua, David, and ultimately, Jesus. Second, Jude is the “brother of James.” Although several men are named James in

¹⁰ Adapted from Douglas J. Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 29.

the NT, this likely refers to James the half brother of Jesus, author of the epistle by that name (James 1:1) and leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:12–21). Thus Jude is a half brother of Jesus as well.

The recipients are described in three ways. First, they are “called,” which refers to believers’ status as having been effectually brought into a saving relationship with God. This status is further described by two additional phrases. They are “beloved in God the Father.” Believers are the objects of the Father’s covenantal love, which is entirely ill-deserved. Finally, believers are “kept for Jesus Christ.” God actively preserves his people in the present as they await the future consummation of all his promises. The perfect tense of these last two descriptions highlights the status of believers before God. All three descriptions may come from the Servant Songs in Isaiah (Isa. 42:1–6; 49:1–8);¹¹ if so, this would signal that believers are the promised eschatological people of God.

2 Jude longs for three things to “be multiplied” to the recipients. “Mercy” is God’s not giving us what we deserve. Because of our sin, we deserve God’s condemnation, but he spares us because of what Christ has done for us (v. 23). “Peace” refers to the end of hostility with God; whereas we once were his enemies, we now have been adopted into his family. In the OT, peace communicated the state of wholeness and completeness that would result when God consummated his promises (Isa. 32:15–18; 48:18; 52:7; 53:5; 54:10). “Love” is more than a feeling; biblically speaking, it is a commitment of the will to seek the ultimate good of another (1 Corinthians 13).

Response

The fact that Jude desires mercy, peace, and love to be multiplied indicates two things. First, it shows that, as believers, we already experience these things in some measure. Second, it reminds us that we should not be content to remain where we are in our experience of God’s blessings. Just as God called Adam and Eve to multiply and fill the earth (Gen. 1:28), and just as the early church multiplied through the preaching of the Word (Acts 6:7), God’s people ought to seek increasing levels of God’s goodness.

¹¹ Bauckham, *Jude*, 2 *Peter*, 25.

JUDE 3–4

³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Section Overview

Although Jude had intended to write a letter focusing on his readers' shared experience of salvation in Christ, false teachers infiltrating the church forced him to change course. In light of these false teachers, Jude calls the believers to stay true to the apostolic gospel.

Section Outline

II. Purpose of the Letter (vv. 3–4)

Comment

3 Because they are God's "beloved"—objects of his special covenant love in Christ—Jude tells his audience that he "was very eager to write to you about our common salvation." "Although" Jude's original plan was to write a letter focusing on the salvation they share in Christ, circumstances had changed that. Instead, Jude "found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints." As the next verse indicates, this necessity stemmed from the presence of false teachers. As a servant of Christ, Jude could not stand idly by and watch the church be led astray. So Jude's purpose is to "appeal" (*parakaleō*) to these believers, a verb communicating strong urging. This letter is no mere helpful advice; it is a word from God through Jude to compel his recipients to a specific course of action.

That action is to "contend for the faith." The verb "contend" (*epagōnizomai*) comes from the language of athletic competition; in Jewish literature it depicts the "struggle which the pious has to go through in this world."¹² In the NT this word family describes the effort necessary to pursue the Christian life (1 Cor. 9:25; Phil. 1:27–30; 1 Tim. 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7) and ministry (Col. 1:29; 1 Tim. 4:10). Jude's readers are to contend for "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints."

¹² TDNT, 1:135; cf. 4 Maccabees 16:16; 17:13–14; Philo, *De agricultura* 111–118.

The word “faith” here refers to the content of what is believed: the truths of the gospel and their entailments for right living. This faith was “once for all delivered to the saints.” This expression signals the decisive revelation of the gospel in and through Jesus Christ, authoritatively passed down by the apostles (1 Cor. 11:23; 15:3; Heb. 1:1–4).

4 The readers must contend for the truth of the gospel because “certain people have crept in unnoticed.” Like spies hiding their true identity and motives, the false teachers have used stealth to infiltrate the church. Rather than arising from within the church, the false teachers were likely itinerants who “had been surreptitious and crafty, pretending to be godly members of the Christian church.”¹³ Jude describes these false teachers in four ways.

First, they “long ago were designated for this condemnation.” The verb “designated” (*prographō*) may have the more specific sense of “written beforehand”;¹⁴ In Greek literature it “is attached to the concept of making official decrees, either in marriage contracts, deeds of sale, or public notices.”¹⁵ The OT and Jewish writings later cited foretold the false teachers’ condemnation. The perfect tense highlights their state of eternal “condemnation” and may also highlight the abiding authority of God’s word.

Second, they are “ungodly,” a word that speaks of a life oriented away from God. Their basic orientation is toward themselves and their own gain, rather than toward God.

Third, they “pervert the grace of our God into sensuality.” The verb “pervert” (*metatithēmi*) has the sense of changing something from one thing to another, altering its very nature. That is what the false teachers have done with the “grace of God,” distorting the apostolic message into an opportunity to indulge in “sensuality” (*aselgeia*). This word refers to a “lack of self-constraint which involves one in conduct that violates all bounds of what is socially acceptable” (2 Pet. 2:2, 7, 18).¹⁶ Often this word has a sexual connotation (Rom. 13:13; 1 Pet. 4:3), and the reference to the sexual immorality of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7) may suggest that this in view here.

Fourth, they “deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” Through their sensual living, the false teachers actively deny the identity and authority of Christ. The two titles “Master” and “Lord” stress Jesus’ complete authority and the unflinching submission he deserves from those who claim him as their Savior.

Response

As God’s people, we need to be constantly reminded to “contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” God has given us his Word and fellowship with his people to continually motivate us to remain faithful to the gospel. We do

13 Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 436.

14 BDAG, s.v. προγράφω (1.b).

15 Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 58.

16 BDAG, s.v. ἀσελγεία.

not need fresh revelation from God; what we need is a fresh understanding and application of the gospel that God revealed through Jesus Christ and passed down to us through the apostolic witness recorded for us in Scripture.

JUDE 5–16

⁵Now I want to remind you, although you once fully knew it, that Jesus, who saved¹ a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe. ⁶And the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day—⁷just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire,² serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

⁸Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. ⁹But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, “The Lord rebuke you.” ¹⁰But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. ¹¹Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error and perished in Korah’s rebellion. ¹²These are hidden reefs³ at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; ¹³wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

¹⁴It was also about these that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied, saying, “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones, ¹⁵to execute judgment on all and to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness that they have committed in such an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” ¹⁶These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own sinful desires; they are loud-mouthed boasters, showing favoritism to gain advantage.

¹Some manuscripts *although you fully knew it, that the Lord who once saved* ²Greek *different flesh*

³Or *are blemishes*

Section Overview

Building on the claim that the condemnation of these ungodly people was written about long ago (Jude 4), Jude describes the false teachers in detail. They are destined for condemnation like those from the OT and Jewish tradition who departed from God’s appointed boundaries (vv. 5–10). In their ungodly lives they follow

in the footsteps of notorious rebels from the OT (vv. 11–13). As a result, God will judge them on the last day, just as Enoch predicted (vv. 14–16).

Section Outline

- III. Description and Condemnation of False Teachers (vv. 5–16)
 - A. False Teachers Are Destined for Condemnation (vv. 5–10)
 - B. False Teachers Live Ungodly Lives (vv. 11–13)
 - C. False Teachers Will Be Judged on the Last Day (vv. 14–16)

Comment

5 To enable believers to contend for the faith once delivered to them, Jude begins by recalling three biblical examples in which God judged those who departed from his ways.¹⁷ Jude acknowledges that “you once fully knew” what he is about to tell them. Often what God’s people need most is not new information but reminders of truths they already know. The first example is the exodus. Jude states that “Jesus . . . saved a people out of the land of Egypt.” NT writers often refer to the exodus as a type of the salvation believers experience (1 Cor. 10:1–22; Heb. 3:7–4:10); Jude is unique in specifically identifying “Jesus” as the one who redeemed the Israelites.¹⁸

Even though Jesus saved the Israelites out of Egypt, he “afterward destroyed those who did not believe.” The verb “destroyed” (*apōlesen*) here refers to physical death, which is a picture of eternal destruction as well (Jude 11). Destruction came upon “those who did not believe.” Jude may have Israel’s golden calf incident in mind (Exodus 32–34), but verbal similarities suggest that Israel’s refusal to enter the Promised Land is in view (Num. 13:1–14:12).¹⁹ Because Israel rebelled in unbelief by refusing to enter the land, God condemned that generation of Israelites to wander forty years in the wilderness until they died (Num. 14:20–38). Jude’s point is clear: those who were delivered from Egypt were eventually judged because they did not persevere in faith in Yahweh and his promises. These events are types that instruct believers concerning how to live as God’s people.

6 The second biblical example is “the angels who did not stay within their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling.” Jude refers to Genesis 6:1–4, where the “sons of God” took “the daughters of men” as their wives, but he interprets the story through Jewish tradition, most likely *1 Enoch* 6–21 (cf. comment on 2 Pet. 2:4). Their sin was a failure to “stay within their own position of authority.” Scripture does not spell out the specific realms of angelic authority, but there are hints that some are assigned to specific roles (Dan. 10:18–21; Luke 1:18–38). Jude further explains that these angels “left their proper dwelling.” This verb (*apoleipō*) communicates a sense of finality in the act of leaving.²⁰ Rather than remaining in

¹⁷ Bauckham (*Jude, 2 Peter*, 46–47) notes that these three examples occur together elsewhere in Jewish literature.

¹⁸ Instead of “Jesus,” a number of manuscripts have “the Lord.” On the whole, a stronger case can be made for “Jesus” being original; cf. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 64–65.

¹⁹ Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 446.

²⁰ BDAG, s.v. ἀπολείπω (3).

their proper place of service, these angels crossed divinely appointed boundaries to engage in sexual immorality.

Because the angels departed from their proper realm, God “has kept” them “in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day.” Since the angels failed to keep (*tēreō*) their own position of authority, God “has kept” (*tēreō*) them in eternal chains until the last day. The perfect tense highlights these angels’ present state. The “eternal chains” ensure that these rebellious angels will never escape their imprisonment, while the “gloomy darkness” expresses their horrific state. This last expression is used elsewhere in Greek literature to describe the utter darkness of the netherworld,²¹ where they remain “until the judgment of the great day.” Although this exact expression is unusual, the concept is quite common. In Revelation 20:7–10 the Devil and his minions are cast into the lake of fire and sulfur to be tormented day and night for eternity. Not even privileged positions of authority shield one from divine judgment for sin.²²

7 The third biblical example of God’s judgment coming on those who depart from his ways is “Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities.” Genesis 18–19 records the well-known story (cf. comments on 2 Pet. 2:6–8). The inhabitants of these cities “indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire.” The first expression translates a verb (*ekporneuō*) that in the LXX refers to behaving like a prostitute (Gen. 38:24; Hos. 1:2; 2:7), but it can also have the general sense of any prohibited sexual activity (Num. 25:1; Deut. 22:21). This imagery of acting as a prostitute is regularly used as a picture of idolatry (Ex. 34:13–16; Ezekiel 16). The second expression—“pursued unnatural desire”—could be rendered woodenly as “depart after other flesh.” This expression confirms that the sexual immorality in view includes (but is not limited to) homosexuality and other forms of deviant sexual behavior (Rom. 1:26–27).

Because of their sexual immorality, these cities “serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” Jude’s language makes clear that this example stands for all to see.²³ The word for “example” (*deigma*) is part of a word family used to portray events, people, or situations pointing beyond themselves to greater realities (John 13:15; James 5:10; 2 Pet. 2:6). These cities served as a public example “by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire,” Jude’s way of summarizing Genesis 19:24. He sees in this a picture of the “eternal fire” awaiting those who have departed from the gospel.

8 Jude now explicitly connects the false teachers threatening his readers to the examples mentioned in verses 5–7. These false teachers do three things. First, they “defile the flesh.” To “defile” (*miaínō*) is to stain something, but by extension the word came to mean “to cause the purity of something to be violated by immoral behavior.”²⁴ In the LXX this verb sometimes has a sexual sense (Gen. 34:5; Num.

21 LSJ, s.v. ζόφος.

22 Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 68.

23 BDAG, s.v. πρόκειμαι (1).

24 BDAG, s.v. μιάνω (2).

5:14; Job 31:11), and it clearly has that sense in *1 Enoch* 7:1, where it describes the actions of the fallen angels who took for themselves human wives. Rather than displaying the fruit of the Spirit, the false teachers produce works of the “flesh” (Gal. 5:19–23).

Second, the false teachers “reject authority.” Although “authority” (*kyriotēs*) refers to spiritual beings elsewhere (Eph. 1:21; Col. 1:16), here it likely refers to the divine authority the risen Lord Jesus exercises.²⁵ Through their sinful lifestyles the false teachers reject the Lord Jesus Christ’s rightful rule over all creation.

Third, they “blaspheme the glorious ones.” In this context blasphemy has the more general sense of “demeaning slander.” The “glorious ones” are angelic beings, called this because of their radiant and glorious appearance. What Jude means is not entirely clear. It could be that the false teachers slandered the good angels involved in giving the Law,²⁶ or that they spoke dismissively of evil angels and their power.²⁷ A final determination is difficult, but in either case the actions of the false teachers are in sharp relief to those of the archangel Michael (Jude 9).

They do these things by “relying on their dreams.” God had warned that false prophets would use dreams to mislead his people (Deut. 13:1–5), and this proved true in Israel’s history (Zech. 10:2). The false teachers are akin to the false prophets in Jeremiah’s day, who engaged in sexual immorality and rejected God’s authority on the basis of their alleged dreams (Jer. 23:9–40).

9 Jude illustrates the folly of the false teachers in their arrogant slander by drawing on Jewish tradition. The “archangel Michael” is the chief angel over Israel (Dan. 10:21; 12:1), who leads the spiritual battle against her enemies (Dan. 10:13; Rev. 12:7). Jewish literature records a number of traditions concerning him,²⁸ including the incident in which he was “contending with the devil” and “disputing about the body of Moses.” Deuteronomy 34:1–12 records the death of Moses but says nothing of the incident described here. According to Jewish tradition, the Devil argued with Michael over Moses’ body, claiming that since Moses was a murderer, his body belonged to him.²⁹ In response, Michael “did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment”; in other words, he did not presumptuously assume authority of his own but merely invoked the Lord’s authority when he stated, “The Lord rebuke you.” This phrase is taken from Zechariah 3:2, where the Lord rebukes Satan for his charges against Joshua the high priest. Jude claims that Michael declared these words to the Devil instead of stating a charge of blasphemy against him. The point is not that such a charge was untrue, but rather that Michael did not presume the authority to make it.

Unlike Michael, the false teachers assumed for themselves the authority to make blasphemous judgments about angelic beings. If someone as powerful and holy as the archangel Michael declined to make a charge that was clearly correct,

²⁵ BDAG, s.v. κυριότης (2).

²⁶ Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 58–61.

²⁷ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 245–247.

²⁸ See Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 81–82.

²⁹ For the sources and a reconstruction of this Jewish tradition, see Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 65–76.

how much more restraint should mere humans exercise in rendering judgments against angelic beings they barely understand?

10 Jude now explicitly contrasts Michael with the false teachers in two ways. First, they “blaspheme all that they do not understand.” Again, “blaspheme” likely has the more general sense of “slander” or “revile.” The expression “all that they do not understand” refers at least to the angelic beings (“glorious ones”; v. 8) but probably extends beyond them to other spiritual matters. Clearly the false teachers do not understand “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (v. 3) or the fact that God’s judgment falls on those who depart from that faith (vv. 5–7).

Second, the false teachers “are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively.” The verb translated “destroyed” (*phtheirō*) could refer to the false teachers’ corruption from their immoral practices (Eph. 4:22; Rev. 19:2) or to the eternal condemnation awaiting them on the last day (1 Cor. 3:17). Both senses fit here, although the first seems most likely. The instrument of their destruction is “all that they . . . understand instinctively.” The adverb “instinctively” (*physikōs*) highlights that the immoral actions of the false teachers flow from their fallen state. Because they are governed by their fallen natural instincts, they are “like unreasoning animals,” incapable of acting on the basis of anything other than instinct.

11 Jude now pronounces a prophetic “woe” on these false teachers based on three things they have done. Each is rooted in a well-known incident from the OT. First, “they walked in the way of Cain.” Walking is a common metaphor in Scripture for one’s manner of life (Ps. 1:1–2; Eph. 2:10; 4:1). The first son of Adam and Eve, Cain killed his brother Abel after the Lord rejected his offering but accepted Abel’s (Gen. 4:1–8). God punished Cain by making him a fugitive, and Cain eventually settled in the land of Nod (Gen. 4:9–16). Jewish literature remembered Cain’s treachery well, attributing to him greed, violence, lust, and, perhaps most relevant for Jude, the leading of people into wickedness.³⁰ In the NT Cain is remembered as the murderer of righteous Abel (Heb. 11:4) and serves as an example of the hatred that leads to murder (1 John 3:12). So, while Jude may refer in general to Cain’s wickedness,³¹ Jude’s familiarity with Jewish tradition suggests he sees Cain as a type of the false teachers plaguing the church.

Second, the false teachers “abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error.” This is no mere flirtation with error; the false teachers have fully surrendered themselves to greed. Balaam was the prophet that Balak, king of Moab, paid to pronounce a curse upon Israel (Numbers 22–24; cf. comment on 2 Pet. 2:15–16).

Third, they “perished in Korah’s rebellion.”³² The Greek word used here for “rebellion” (*antilogia*) suggests a strong verbal element to the rebellion,³³ as was

30 Ibid., 79–80. See *Jubilees* 4:31; *Testament of Benjamin* 7:1–5; *Apocalypse of Abraham* 24:3–5; *Apocalypse of Moses* 2:1–4; 3:1–3; 40:4–5; 1 *Enoch* 22:7.

31 Schreiner, 1, 2 *Peter*, Jude, 463.

32 By taking the Korah incident out of chronological order and placing it last, Jude gives it special prominence, perhaps because of its relevance to the church’s situation; cf. Schreiner, 1, 2 *Peter*, Jude, 464.

33 BDAG, s.v. ἀντιλογία (2).

the case with Korah. He led a rebellion against Moses' and Aaron's leadership of Israel, accusing them of exalting themselves above the people and lying to Israel about bringing them to a luxurious land (Numbers 16). The Lord judged Korah and his followers, as well as those who grumbled about God's judgment. In Jewish tradition, Korah "became the classic example of the antinomian heretic."³⁴ Since Korah rebelled against God's appointed leadership, Jude may be indicating that the false teachers are undermining the leadership of the church. In any case, their fate will be as Korah's—destruction.

12–13 Jude now uses six vivid images to portray the false teachers, with all but the second coming from nature. First, they are "hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear." As hidden reefs, their treachery lies just below the surface, destroying the unsuspecting. The false teachers feast alongside believers at their "love feasts," the full meals in which the Lord's Supper was commemorated (1 Cor. 11:17–34).³⁵ They do so "without fear," showing no concern for their sinful lives or the destruction they bring upon others.

Second, they are "shepherds feeding themselves." Shepherds were a common metaphor for leaders in the OT. Because of God's covenant with David (2 Samuel 7), David became the paradigm of a future shepherd-king who would rule over God's people (Ezek. 34:23–24). As the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, Jesus fulfills that hope (John 10:11), appointing pastors as undershepherds to care for God's people under his authority (1 Pet. 5:1–5). Instead of protecting and feeding God's people, however, the shepherds Jude denounces are interested only in exploiting the sheep for their own benefit (Ezek. 34:1–8).

Third, the false teachers are "waterless clouds, swept along by winds." Although clouds often symbolize God's presence in Scripture (Ex. 13:21–22; Luke 9:34–36), here they portray the false teachers. They are like clouds that give the appearance of holding rain but in fact do not. In the LXX, the term "waterless" (*anydros*) often describes the desert, and in some cases it is used in contrast to the new creation God promises to bring (Isa. 35:7; 41:19; 43:19–20; 44:3). Also pertinent here is Proverbs 25:14—"Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of a gift he does not give." The false teachers lack the life-giving sustenance of the living water of the gospel, and thus they are blown around aimlessly by the winds of personal whims and doctrinal confusion.

Fourth, they are "fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted." Scripture often describes God's people as trees/plants/vines that he planted to bear fruit (Isa. 5:1–7; John 15:1–11). Jesus warned of false prophets who were wolves in sheep's clothing and could be recognized by the fruit they bore (Matt. 7:15–20). God had promised to produce fruit in his people in the new creation (Isa. 65:21; Gal. 5:22–23). Trees in "late autumn" would be expected to hold fruit, but these false teachers do not. They are instead "twice dead," which in this context could refer to

³⁴ Bauckham, *Jude*, 2 *Peter*, 83.

³⁵ The false teachers may have approached the love feasts as Greco-Roman banquets; cf. Green, *Jude and 2 Peter*, 93–95.

the second death (Rev. 21:8) or could simply anticipate the next description of being “uprooted.” If the latter option is correct, the point is that the trees were already dead but then experienced a second death by being uprooted. The mention of a lack of rain, of fruit not being borne, and of stars not holding to their appointed courses (see sixth point, below) suggests Jude is borrowing language from *1 Enoch* 80:2–6.

Fifth, they are “wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame.” The expression “wild waves” portrays the volatility and uncontrolled immoral behavior of the false teachers. Jude may borrow the expression “casting up the foam of their own shame” from Isaiah 57:20, where the wicked are said to be like “the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt.” Just as waves dredge filth from the bottom of the sea and toss it to the surface, so the ungodliness of the false teachers overflows into public view.

Sixth, the false teachers are “wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.” Unlike the saints, who will shine like stars in the resurrection (Dan. 12:3), the false teachers have departed from their proper sphere and thus merit judgment. For them, “the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.” On “gloom” (*zophos*) see comment on Jude 6. This terrifying fate has been reserved forever; it will surely happen. Just as believers are “kept for Jesus Christ” (v. 1) and believers are to “keep [themselves] in the love of God” (v. 21), so too eternal condemnation is kept for God’s enemies.

14–15 Jude now connects the false teachers to another OT figure—“Enoch, the seventh from Adam” (Gen. 5:18–24). In a lengthy genealogy (Gen. 5:1–32), Enoch stands out as the only person who apparently does not die (Gen. 5:24). Despite only one other OT mention of Enoch (1 Chron. 1:3), Jewish literature engaged in significant speculation about him, and he became regarded as a recipient of heavenly visions and revelations, recorded in a series of books named after him.

Jude asserts that Enoch “prophesied” about the final judgment awaiting the false teachers: “Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of his holy ones.” While Jude quotes from *1 Enoch* 1:9,³⁶ similar language occurs in several OT texts. Deuteronomy 33:2 states that God appeared on Mount Sinai with “ten thousands of holy ones.” Similarly, Daniel 7:10 describes a judgment scene around God’s throne in which “ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.” The imagery portrays God as a divine warrior, leading his heavenly hosts out to establish justice. The “holy ones” in view could be angels, based on the language of Deuteronomy 33:2, although in the very next verse “holy ones” seems to be parallel to “his people” (Deut. 33:3). A decision either way is difficult.

The Lord comes with his holy ones for two purposes. First, he does so “to execute judgment on all.” The literal phrase is “to do judgment,” a typical Semitic expression (Jer. 7:5; 22:3; John 5:27). This refers to the universal judgment on the last day. Second, he does so “to convict all the ungodly of all their deeds of ungodliness.” While the verb “convict” (*elenchō*) can have the sense of exposing

³⁶ On Jude’s use of *1 Enoch*, see Introduction: Interpretive Challenges.

something, here it has the stronger sense of “to bring a person to the point of recognizing wrongdoing,”³⁷ often with a strong judicial sense (Jer. 2:19; Hos. 5:9; John 16:8–11). Those convicted are the “ungodly” (*asebēs*), a word stressing their fundamental orientation away from God.

The ungodly are convicted of two things. First, they are convicted of their “deeds of ungodliness.” Jude further describes these deeds as being “committed in such an ungodly way.” Their works are completely saturated in ungodliness, from their origin through their execution to their outcome. Second, they are convicted of “all the harsh things that ungodly sinners have spoken against him.” Special focus is now given to the words of the ungodly, which they use to blaspheme God and his ways. This last expression is especially relevant for the false teachers Jude was confronting, who blaspheme all they do not understand (v. 10).

16 Jude now offers five further descriptions of the false teachers. First, they are “grumblers” (*gongystēs*), from a word group regularly associated with the Israelites’ grumbling against God in the wilderness (Ex. 16:7–12; 1 Cor. 10:10). Jude may be echoing these traditions in addition to the generic concept of someone who murmurs or complains. Second, they are “malcontents” (*mempsimoiros*), those who complain about their lot in life; here the term is used “in a satirical comment about people who choose a deviant life style and then complain (with tongue in cheek?) that this is their ‘unfortunate fate.’”³⁸

Third, they are “following their own sinful desires,” or, more woodenly, “walking according to their own desires.” Jude repeats a verb (*poreuomai*) from verse 11 to link their sinful desires with Cain. Fourth, “they are loud-mouthed boasters”; literally “their mouths speak pompously.” The word rendered “boasters” (*hyperonkos*) refers to something swollen or puffed up to an excessive size. Their arrogance leads them to draw attention brashly to themselves through their boasting (2 Pet. 2:18). Fifth, they are “showing favoritism to gain advantage,” or, perhaps more literally, “marveling at the face for the sake of advantage.” The metaphor of respecting or marveling at the face was a common way to express the idea of showing partiality (cf. Rom. 2:11). These false teachers regularly look for some angle “to make themselves acceptable to those members of the community on whose generosity they depend for their living.”³⁹

Response

Jude sounds a sober warning for those who claim to be converted or are affiliated with the church but do not have genuine faith in Christ. Those who deny the authority of Christ through persistent sexual immorality, greed, and rebellion against God’s leaders should expect condemnation on the last day. Those who are driven by their sinful instincts and desires in the pursuit of pleasure, satisfaction, meaning, and significance face certain condemnation.

37 BDAG, s.v. ἐλέγχω (2).

38 BDAG, s.v. μεμψιμοιρος.

39 Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, 100.

Yet God has given us types/patterns in Scripture as a warning to persevere in our faith in Christ and hold fast to the true gospel. As we see the numerous examples of those who turned away from the Lord to follow their own sinful ways, we should ask him to show us areas of our lives where those same sinful desires may be lurking.

JUDE 17–23

¹⁷ But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ They¹ said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions.” ¹⁹ It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. ²⁰ But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, ²¹ keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. ²² And have mercy on those who doubt; ²³ save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment² stained by the flesh.

¹Or *Christ, because they* ²Greek *chiton*, a long garment worn under the cloak next to the skin

Section Overview

Having concluded his denunciation of the false teachers, Jude now returns to the themes of verses 3–5, explaining what it means to contend for the faith.⁴⁰ He issues five commands, which fall into three broad categories.⁴¹ First, his readers must remember the apostolic warnings (vv. 17–19). Second, they must keep themselves in the love of God (vv. 20–21). Finally, they must show mercy to those in trouble (vv. 22–23).

Section Outline

- IV. Stay True to the Gospel (vv. 17–23)
 - A. Remember the Apostolic Warnings (vv. 17–19)
 - B. Keep Yourselves in the Love of God (vv. 20–21)
 - C. Show Mercy to Those in Trouble (vv. 22–23)

Comment

17–18 After focusing largely on what the false teachers are like, Jude now shifts to explain how his readers should respond to this threat. As God’s “beloved,” they must “remember . . . the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The

⁴⁰ Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 84–85.

⁴¹ Moo, *2 Peter, Jude*, 280.

OT repeatedly commands God's people to remember (Deut. 5:15; 7:18; 8:2; 24:9), and the NT does the same (Eph. 2:11; 2 Tim. 2:8). Jude has in mind more than mere "predictions"; woodenly, he refers to "the words spoken beforehand by the apostles." Such words must be remembered because they come from "the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ." The apostles were the authoritative witnesses to the life and teaching of Jesus, commissioned by Christ himself to pass along the good news, both orally and in the writings that eventually formed the NT.

The apostles warned that "in the last time there will be scoffers." The phrase "last time" refers to the entire period stretching from the first advent of Christ to his second coming. The epithet "scoffers" refers to those who make fun by mocking⁴² with a dismissive attitude of self-assured arrogance. As scoffers, they are "following their own ungodly passions." Jude echoes language from the 1 *Enoch* citation (Jude 15) in the apostles' warning (v. 18) in order to cement the link between those prophecies and the false teachers.

19 The mention of scoffers prompts another list of descriptions of the false teachers. First, they "cause divisions." Through their false teaching and immoral lifestyles they divide the church, creating unrest. Second, they are "worldly people." This adjective (*psychikos*) has a wide range of meaning; here it refers to the "life of the natural world and whatever belongs to it, in contrast to the realm of experience whose central characteristic is" the Spirit.⁴³ To be "worldly" is to have one's life oriented to and dictated by the values of this fallen world (James 3:15). Third, the false teachers are "devoid of the Spirit." Although they claim to know Christ, their lives demonstrate that God's Spirit does not dwell in them, which is the defining characteristic of the eschatological people of God (Gal. 3:1–5; Eph. 1:13–14).

20–21 Jude has already called his readers to remember the apostolic teaching (vv. 17–18); now he gives further positive instruction for dealing with the false teachers. He exhorts his readers to "keep yourselves in the love of God" as those who are "kept for Jesus Christ" (v. 1). It is not clear whether Jude means God's love for the believer or the believer's love for God. Both ideas are present in Jude, but on the whole, God's love for the believer seems to be the preferable reading (cf. John 15:9–10; 1 John 4:16).

Believers keep themselves in the love of God by doing three things. First, by "building yourselves up in your most holy faith." This verb (*epoikodomeō*) means "to build something on something already built."⁴⁴ Believers are "rooted and built up in him and established in the faith" (Col. 2:7), and God is building Christians into a temple for his presence to indwell (Eph. 2:19–22). In contrast to the false teachers, who divide the body, believers must work together for their corporate growth in godliness.⁴⁵ Believers build on their already-existing "most holy faith."

42 J. P. Louw and Eugene Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), s.v. ἐμπαίκτης (§33.407).

43 BDAG, s.v. ψυχικός (b,β).

44 BDAG, s.v. ἐποικοδομέω (ω).

45 Davids, *Letters of 2 Peter and Jude*, 94.

The true faith of the gospel sets the believer apart and produces a life of holiness (2 Pet. 1:5–8), in contrast to the immoral lives of the false teachers.

The second way that believers keep themselves in the love of God is by “praying in the Holy Spirit.” Whereas the false teachers are “devoid of the Spirit” (Jude 19), believers have the privilege of praying in the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, who intercedes on our behalf (Rom. 8:26). Paul exhorts believers to pray “at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:18).

Finally, believers keep themselves in the love of God by “waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus.” The verb “waiting for” (*prosdechomai*) regularly has an eschatological sense, as it does here (Mark 15:43; Luke 2:25; Titus 2:13). The object of our expectation is the “mercy” we will receive on the last day from Jesus Christ, who because of his saving work has already borne the judgment we deserve for our sins. The ultimate result will be “eternal life,” an unending experience of the riches of God’s grace in a new heavens and new earth.

Woven into these verses are two triads. The first is the Trinity, with the Father, Son, and Spirit each being mentioned. The second is the triad of faith, hope (i.e., “waiting”), and love, commonly found in Paul’s letters (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13).

22–23 In light of all that Jude has said about the false teachers, he now issues three final commands for his readers concerning others affected⁴⁶ by the false teachers.⁴⁷ Believers must first “have mercy” on them. Because God is merciful (Ps. 116:5) and has shown us mercy through Christ (Eph. 2:4–7), we must be conduits of God’s mercy to others. The verb rendered “doubt” (*diakrinō*) can also be rendered “dispute”—the same verb describes Michael’s disputing with the Devil (Jude 9). Hope remains for those who doubt or dispute, if they repent.

Second, believers should “save” them “by snatching them out of the fire.” God can use his people to rescue even the false teachers from the “fire” of eternal destruction, the same fate that befell Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 7). Before the flames of eternal judgment overtake the vulnerable, God’s people are called to “snatch” (*harpazō*) them from the fire, a verb often carrying the sense of forceful action.⁴⁸ Too much is at stake for believers not to take decisive action to rescue others from the destruction awaiting the false teachers.

Third, believers must “show” them “mercy with fear.” Whereas the first command to show mercy identifies the recipients (v. 22), this one explains how mercy must be shown (v. 23). Fear is necessary because it is all too easy to be drawn into the same kind of sin (Gal. 6:1). Believers show this mercy while “hating even the garment stained by the flesh.” The “garment” in view is the *chiton*, a robe-like article of clothing worn next to the skin, often running from the neck down to the knees or even ankles. By describing it as “stained,” Jude pictures a soiled undergarment.

⁴⁶ While most interpreters conclude that Jude refers to different groups of people affected by the false teachers, a case can also be made for Jude’s referring to just one group of people—the false teachers; cf. Darian Lockett, “Objects of Mercy in Jude: The Prophetic Background of Jude 22–23,” *CBQ* 77 (2015): 322–336.

⁴⁷ Determining the original text of verses 22–23a is one of the most difficult textual problems in the NT. On the whole, the text reflected by the ESV is likely correct; cf. discussion in Tommy Wasserman, *The Epistle of Jude: Its Text and Transmission*, ConBNT 43 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2006), 320–331.

⁴⁸ See Matthew 12:29, where it refers to a thief plundering a house.

Jude draws his language from Zechariah 3:1–4, where, before the Lord’s presence, Satan reproaches Joshua the high priest for his filthy garments.⁴⁹ God rebukes Satan, calling Joshua a “brand plucked from the fire” (Zech. 3:2).⁵⁰ Joshua receives new clothes to symbolize God’s forgiveness. For Jude, this is a picture of what could happen for the false teachers if they repented.

Response

Because we are prone to forget what God has done for us, we must constantly expose ourselves to God’s Word. Regularly reading it, hearing it preached and taught, memorizing it, and discussing it with others are just some of the ways we can immerse ourselves in Scripture. By building ourselves up in this way and praying in the Holy Spirit, we keep ourselves in God’s love as we await his mercy on the last day. Because our hope is set on Christ’s mercy toward us, we are able to show mercy to those caught in sin and deception while keeping ourselves from the sin that has ensnared them. All of this requires intentional effort and active participation in the body of Christ.

JUDE 24–25

²⁴Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, ²⁵to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time¹ and now and forever. Amen.

¹Or *before any age*

Section Overview

Jude closes his letter with a stirring doxology highlighting God’s majestic authority and his power to preserve believers until he presents them blameless before himself on the last day.

Section Outline

V. Doxology (vv. 24–25)

Comment

24–25 Jude now closes his letter with a doxology praising the glorious power of God to preserve his people, spanning past, present, and future. First, God is praised for his ability “to keep you from stumbling.” Jude again emphasizes the idea of

⁴⁹ See Lockett, “Objects of Mercy,” 334–336.

⁵⁰ Amos 4:11 uses similar imagery, describing the remnant of Israel as a “brand plucked out of the burning.”

“keeping” (vv. 1, 6, 13, 21), though using a different Greek verb (*phyllassō*); this term has the sense of guarding or protecting someone (John 17:11–12; 2 Thess. 3:3).⁵¹ God promises to keep believers from “stumbling” (*aptaistos*), a rare word that Philo uses to explain that no one can live an entire lifetime without sinning (*Quod Deus sit immutabilis* 1.75). Believers are called to run the race of the Christian life by avoiding the entanglements of sin and the world, in the confidence that God will protect them (Ps. 121:1–8; Heb. 12:1–2).

God is also able “to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy.” Those who keep themselves in the love of God will stand before the Lord as perfect reflections of Jesus Christ, the blameless one (1 Pet. 1:19). While believers have had their eyes opened to see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6), we still await the day when we see the Lord face-to-face (1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4). God’s “glory” is the visible manifestation of his character, often communicated by his name (Ex. 33:18–34:9) but most fully communicated in his Son, Jesus Christ (John 1:14; Heb. 1:3). All that God does is ultimately to display his own glory (Hab. 2:14). The “great joy” believers will experience on that day is the culmination of Christ’s joy in us as it reaches its full realization (John 15:11) when we celebrate the consummation of God’s promises (Isa. 66:7–14).

Jude gives several descriptions of God to explain why God is worthy of praise. He is the “only God,” stressing his utter uniqueness (Deut. 6:4–5). He is “our Savior,” the one who rescues believers from sin and eternal destruction. This praise is offered “through Jesus Christ our Lord,” an expression that occurs in various forms in the NT to identify Christ as the one through whom God’s blessings come to us (Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 15:57; 1 Thess. 5:9).

Jude prays that four specific attributes of God would be recognized and magnified. On “glory,” see above. “Majesty” (*megalōsynē*) is a “state of greatness or preeminence,”⁵² and the term occurs elsewhere in the NT as a title for God (Heb. 1:3; 8:1). “Dominion” (*kratos*) highlights God’s sovereign rule over the universe as the rightful king, and it is ascribed to God often in doxologies or statements of praise (Isa. 40:26; Rev. 1:6; 5:13). “Authority” refers to the power God exercises in his rule over creation. These attributes are grounds for praising God “before all time and now and forever.” God has been worthy of praise from eternity past, is currently worthy of praise, and will continue to be worthy of praise forevermore. The appropriate response is simply “Amen”—so be it!

Response

Given the very real danger of false teaching that leads us away from the truths of the gospel, it is reassuring to know that God is the one who keeps us from stumbling. God will present his people to himself as perfect reflections of his Son, Jesus, in order to display his own glory and to share his eternal joy with his people. That hope is sufficient to sustain us in the face of whatever God brings into our lives.

⁵¹ BDAG, s.v. φυλάσσω (2.b).

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REVELATION

Thomas R. Schreiner

INTRODUCTION TO REVELATION

Overview

G. K. Chesterton humorously quipped regarding Revelation, “Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.”¹ We are reminded at the outset that the book of Revelation has brilliance and beauty outshining any attempt to explain it.² John wrote Revelation to churches facing persecution and being tempted to compromise with Roman imperial power and cave in to the social pressures of pagan society. He calls upon these churches to stay faithful until the end, reminding them that God and Christ are sovereign over the evil they face. Believers should rejoice, despite persecution and discrimination from opponents, for they can be assured a place in the heavenly city since they are washed clean by the blood of the Lamb. If they endure until the end, they will enjoy God and the Lamb forever. Ultimately, God will vindicate those who are his. Furthermore, God reigns over history, and his reign is expressed in his judgments unleashed on the earth. Those judgments will culminate in the final judgment, where the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire and the righteous will enter the new Jerusalem. God’s name will be honored and praised forever for vindicating the righteous and punishing the wicked.

Title

The title of the book comes from the first word in the Greek text: Revelation (*Apokalypsis*). The book is a revelation *of* Jesus Christ and *from* Jesus Christ (cf. comment on Rev. 1:1). Jesus Christ is the subject matter of the book; the book is thoroughly and strikingly Christological. At the same time, Jesus transmitted what was given to him to an angel, the angel passed it on to John, and John passed it on to the churches.

¹ Gilbert K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 29.

² This commentary is written at a semipopular level and hence doesn’t interact with other scholars who have written on Revelation. I was originally taught Revelation from a dispensational standpoint. I learned much from that viewpoint (even if I finally disagree rather significantly), and one can find that perspective in the commentaries of John Walvoord, Robert Thomas, and Paige Patterson. I also stand in debt to a number of other commentators. See especially the commentaries by Leon Morris, Dennis Johnson, G. B. Caird, Bruce Metzger, Robert Mounce, George Eldon Ladd, Vern Poythress, James M. Hamilton Jr., David Aune, Greg Beale, Grant Osborne, and George Beasley-Murray. Two books on the theology of Revelation by Richard Bauckham also influenced me. See his *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1993).

Author

The author identifies himself as John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8) but doesn't identify himself as an apostle. He informs us he wrote the letter from Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea opposite Miletus off the coast of modern-day Turkey. Various theories have been offered about authorship, but the most probable is that the book was written by either the apostle John or a certain "John the Elder." Identifying the author as the apostle John is the most convincing, for several reasons. First, an author who didn't mention his authority was probably a person of prestige and thus felt no need to refer to his office. The apostle John fits this description best. Second, the earliest and most common view among the church fathers (including Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Clement of Alexandria) was that the apostle John wrote the book. Third, Eusebius of Caesarea identified the author as John the Elder based on Papias's testimony (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.2–4), and this view has been endorsed by some prominent scholars today. Eusebius, however, probably misinterpreted Papias's words, for Papias wasn't speaking of two Johns. If we read Papias carefully, we see that John the Elder and John the Apostle were the same person, for Papias calls the apostles "elders." Furthermore, Eusebius had personal reasons for wanting to distance the apostle John from Revelation, for he was biased against the book.

The most significant objection to apostolic authorship is the style of Revelation, which departs significantly from the style of the Gospel of John.³ The objection isn't compelling, for the different style is explained by the apocalyptic genre of the work. Remarkable differences between the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation are surely present, but the simple Greek style of Revelation fits with what we find in the Gospel of John.⁴ Others have objected that the theology of Revelation contradicts John's Gospel, for the former declares judgment on God's enemies while the latter proclaims God's love. The dichotomy erected is a false one, for judgment is threatened in the Gospel as well (John 3:36; 5:22, 29; 12:48), and Revelation promises salvation to those who repent and wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 3:19–21; 7:13–14; 9:20–21; 22:14). We also see some rather striking and unusual points of contact: Jesus in both books is the Word of God (John 1:1, 14; Rev. 19:13), the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36; Rev. 5:6; 19:7, 9; 21:9), and the Son of Man (John 1:51; 3:13, 14; Rev. 1:12–16). The simplest and most persuasive solution is that John the Apostle wrote the book of Revelation.

Date and Occasion

Scholars dispute whether Revelation was written in the 60s AD, when Nero reigned as emperor (AD 54–68), or in the 90s, when Domitian reigned (AD 81–96). Certainty is impossible, but a date in the 90s seems preferable for at least three

3 On the syntax and vocabulary of the book, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1997), clx–ccxi. I believe the apostle John also wrote the Gospel of John, but the scope of this present work prohibits a full defense of that view.

4 Often I designate the book of Revelation simply as "Revelation." Context will make it clear when the book of Revelation is intended.

reasons. First, Irenaeus is most plausibly interpreted as saying Revelation was written under Domitian, for he says, around the year AD 180, that the Apocalypse was seen near the end of Domitian's reign (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.18.3; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3). Irenaeus's close proximity to John gives his testimony credibility, for Irenaeus was a hearer of Polycarp (c. AD 70–160), and Polycarp was, according to tradition, discipled by John the Apostle. Second, though the matter is disputed, it is likely that pressure to worship the emperor increased under Domitian, and the contents of Revelation fit with such a reality. The scattered and sporadic persecution in Revelation accords with the evidence of Domitian's reign. The persecution wasn't state sponsored or official, but it was always threatened and sometimes broke out with ferocity, as table 9.1 shows.

TABLE 9.1: Indications of Persecution in Revelation

1:9	John banished to Patmos
2:13	Antipas put to death
3:10	Trial on whole earth
6:9–11	Martyrs under the altar
16:6	Babylon poured out blood of God's people
17:6	Babylon drunk from blood of saints
18:24	Babylon drunk from blood of saints
19:2	God avenged blood of his servants
20:4	Martyrs beheaded

Third, Laodicea is described as a rich city (Rev. 3:14–21), but it suffered from an earthquake in AD 60–61, and a date in the 60s would have been too early for the city to have recovered its riches.

Revelation, then, was probably written in the 90s, to churches facing sporadic persecution from Rome, with a particular threat from the imperial cult. It is probable that Jews in their communities also discriminated against Christians and perhaps even reported them to the authorities (2:9; 3:9). Christians also faced local social pressures from trade guilds, which celebrated festivals for various gods and engaged in cultic practices; the failure of Christians to participate in such activities would have suggested that they were not good citizens. John wrote Revelation to encourage believers to endure until the final day, promising them they would enter the new Jerusalem if they continued to persevere in faith.

Genre and Literary Structure

The book of Revelation has a mixed genre, including epistolary and prophetic elements, though the apocalyptic character of the book especially stands out. The book is specifically identified by the author as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 9, 10, 18, 19; cf. 10:8–11), and it includes seven letters to churches (2:1–3:22). The epistolary

character of the book indicates it was to be read orally in the churches in its entirety (1:3). Still, what characterizes the book most notably is its apocalyptic genre. But it is apocalypse merged with prophecy, so that the book is prophetic/apocalyptic, written to call the church to faith and action in perilous times. The apocalyptic genre wasn't an innovation of John, for parts of Isaiah (24:1–27:13), Ezekiel (37:1–39:29), Daniel (7:1–12:13), and Zechariah (esp. 9:1–14:21) are apocalyptic. Jewish books written during the Second Temple period were also apocalyptic, including 1–2 *Enoch*, 2–3 *Baruch*, 4 *Ezra*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. The apocalypse seminar of the Society of Biblical Literature studied the apocalyptic genre for a number of years and produced the following definition. Every word of the definition was doubtless debated and discussed carefully, since it is the product of a committee of experts on apocalyptic literature. This doesn't mean the definition is flawless, yet we should pay close attention to a definition composed by experts in apocalyptic literature. They write,

Apocalypse is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world. Apocalypse was intended to interpret present earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.⁵

A more popular and less technical way of putting it is as follows: Apocalypse is a supernatural unveiling of what is about to take place. A divine disclosure is given, usually by angels to some prominent person, in which God promises to intervene in human history, destroy evil, and bring his kingdom. We should add that apocalypses are given to encourage and strengthen those who are suffering to persevere and continue in the faith. Readers are encouraged to “hang on,” for they will triumph ultimately.

Certain features characterize apocalyptic literature, the most important being its symbolic language. Some interpreters approach the book with what I call “newspaper eschatology,” interpreting Revelation through contemporary events. Such an approach, however, is arbitrary and inconsistent. It is arbitrary inasmuch as the interpretation changes as history marches on, as anyone knows who has followed this approach over the years. It is inconsistent inasmuch as the claim to take the book “literally” is contradicted by their own symbolic interpretations. No one actually follows a literalistic hermeneutic in reading the book. For instance, no one believes Jesus really has a double-edged sword in his mouth (Rev. 1:16). The symbolism of the book should produce humility in us as interpreters, for we must confess we don't always know how to interpret the symbols. In any case, the

⁵ See John J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14 (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1979), 9.

most important background for interpreting the book is not the newspaper but the OT, for Revelation is infused with OT allusions. Virtually every line of the book echoes the OT witness. Hence, the fundamental reason some interpreters go astray is that they don't anchor their reading of Revelation in the OT.

The symbolic nature of Revelation should be especially observed relative to numbers. Revelation uses the numbers four, seven, ten, twelve, and multiples of the same symbolically. Some dispensational interpreters have argued the book should be interpreted literally if possible, but such a stance is flawed, for saying we must interpret literally begs the question. We must recognize instead that authors may intend symbolism in their writings. The art of interpreting Revelation can't be solved with a prefabricated rule about literal interpretation. Instead, we should interpret Revelation in accord with the genre used; if the language used is symbolic, we must interpret it in light of such symbolic conventions.

Other features of apocalypse include visions, angels, and otherworldly creatures. Often apocalypses are pseudonymous, but Revelation clearly stands apart, for the author identifies himself as John and doesn't appeal to some famous person from the past. The following list summarizes some features of apocalyptic literature:

Historical dualism

Visions

Pseudonymity (Revelation excepted)

Symbolism

Numerology

Angelology

Demonology

Predicted woes

It is helpful in interpreting Revelation to distinguish four levels of communication.⁶ First is the linguistic level: the text itself, the words John wrote. Second are the visions John saw, recorded in the text. Third is the referential level, the historical referent of the visions. Fourth is the symbolic level, explicating via images the larger significance of the historical referent. One example should suffice. First, at the textual level John wrote about the beast (Rev. 13:1–8). Second, at the visionary level he presumably saw an actual beast that was quite horrible. Third, the referent to the beast is most likely the Roman emperor. Fourth, the Roman emperor may stand symbolically for any and all empires opposed to the one true God. I am not claiming that all four elements are present in every instance in Revelation, nor is it always easy to apply these four principles to what we find in the book. Still, the four levels have a heuristic value in assisting us as we attempt to interpret the book.

⁶ For these distinctions, see Vern Sheridan Poythress, "Genre and Hermeneutics in Revelation 20:1–6," *JETS* 36 (1993): 41–54.

Theology of Revelation

THE REALITY OF EVIL

The message of Revelation won't resonate with readers unless the evil opposing God is recognized. The prime mover of evil in the world is the Devil, or Satan. The nature of the Devil is communicated through the names he is given. He is identified as the "devil" (*diabolos*), meaning he accuses the people of God (2:10; 12:9, 12; 20:2, 10). The Devil is also called the "serpent" (*ophis*), which reaches back to Genesis 3 and recognizes the Devil as the one who tempted Eve (Rev. 12:9, 14, 15; 20:2)—which explains why he is called the "ancient serpent." The Devil is also called a "dragon" (*drakōn*), representing a mythological monster and formidable enemy who hates and oppresses the people of God (12:3, 4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17; 13:2, 4; 16:13; 20:2).⁷ Finally, the Devil is identified as "Satan" (*satanas*), the great adversary of God, Christ, and his people (2:9, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2, 7). "Satan" transliterates the Hebrew term for accuser/adversary, translated into Greek as *diabolos* in Zechariah 3:1–2. Hence it too may have the notion of accuser. Satan persecutes the people of God incessantly (Rev. 12:13–17). He even uses religion, if it accords with his purposes, and thus even a Jewish synagogue, insofar as it oppresses the church, is satanic (2:9–10; 3:9). Satan calls forth the beast (the Roman Empire), granting it authority to prosecute his war against the saints (13:1–18). Satan deceives the world, hindering it from seeing the love of God in Jesus Christ (12:9; 20:8, 10).

Satan doesn't act alone. Indeed, the beast and the false prophet are part of the "unholy trinity" (16:13). One of the primary ways Satan works is counterfeiting and parodying the things of God. The dragon and the beast long above all else to be worshiped and praised, arrogating to themselves the glory belonging to God and the Lamb (13:4; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 20:4). In the case of the first beast, we have a parody of the resurrection, since it "dies" and returns to life (13:3), and hence the beast seems to be invincible, even speaking against God with impunity (13:4–5). This first beast, which is the Roman Empire and represents all human government opposed to God, is summoned by Satan from the sea (12:17–13:2) and comes from the abyss (11:7). The beast persecutes, kills, and discriminates against the people of God (11:7; 13:7, 16–17), exercising political power in the world (13:7). The second beast, the false prophet (13:11–18; 19:20), tries to impersonate the Lamb (13:11) and the Holy Spirit. The second beast is a parody of the Spirit in that he bestows glory on the first beast (13:14–15) and allegedly speaks divine words. The second beast stands for false religion, which, as Paul says, has the "appearance of godliness" but lacks its "power" (2 Tim. 3:5). The beast and the false prophet make war against God and Christ, resisting divine authority at every turn (Rev. 19:19–21).

The evil permeating the world is also represented by Babylon (14:8; 16:19; 17:1–19:5). Babylon is the city of Rome (17:18), but it also represents what Augustine called the "city of man," opposed to the "city of God." Babylon is a harlot, a wicked and brazen witch. The people of the earth join her harlotry by

⁷ I am not suggesting that Satan himself is mythical!

forsaking the one true God (17:2). Her detestable idolatry manifests itself in her fierce opposition to the people of God, the spilling of the blood of God's saints (17:6; 18:24; 19:2), and her lust for economic security. Babylon is drunk with the blood of those who belong to God. And it is not as if only a few participate in her prostitution—nations, merchants, and kings join to enjoy the riches of the godless system (18:3). The city of man lives for luxury and comfort, but its day of comfort and joy will be short-lived (18:9–24).

Evil rules over all who don't belong to Jesus Christ. Instead of worshiping and praising God and the Lamb, they have yielded their devotion to the dragon, the beast, and Babylon (13:8, 12). They are often called "the earth dwellers" (*hoi katoikountes epi tēs gēs*; cf. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8), which functions as a technical term for unbelievers who live on the earth. These "earth dwellers" live for this world instead of the coming new creation, and their names are not inscribed in the book of life (17:8). The earth dwellers are deceived by the false prophet and so give themselves to the beast (13:14). They get in bed with Babylon (17:2) and hence put to death God's people and rejoice when saints are slain (6:10; 11:10). Hence they will be judged (8:13).

THE SUFFERING OF THE SAINTS

The evil dominating the world leads to the suffering of the saints—the people of God. Texts mentioning such suffering are found in a table under Date and Occasion, above. It should be underscored that Revelation was written to suffering churches, to Christians who faced implacable opposition from the government and society. It wasn't written to believers who merely had an academic interest in prophecy. Jesus Christ called them to be ready to die for his sake (2:10); amid great suffering they were summoned to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ (11:3–14). Christians were being slain because of their testimony about Jesus Christ and faithfulness to the Word of God (20:4), and Revelation makes it plain that believers will be put to death until Jesus returns. The unholy trinity hates the people of God and tries to destroy them through discrimination and persecution. The church in Revelation is described as a martyr church. It doesn't follow that every believer will actually be slain by those who oppose God, but every genuine believer will be persecuted and hated by the world (cf. 2 Tim. 3:12).

CALL TO PERSEVERANCE

Linked to the suffering of believers is the call to persevere until the end. In the face of great evil they must not buckle under pressure to compromise with Rome. After recounting the rise of the beast and his resistance to God, John declares, "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10). John reminds his readers of the judgment to be meted out on those who worship the beast; they will experience God's unending wrath and torment (14:9–11). The impending judgment summons believers to perseverance: "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus" (14:12). In

every one of the letters to the seven churches, believers are called to “conquer,” or overcome (2:7, 11, 17, 25–26; 3:5, 12, 21). Overcoming isn’t optional for believers. John isn’t saying that those who overcome will get a special reward above and beyond eternal life. Instead, *only* those who overcome will eat from the tree of life (2:7). Only those who overcome will conquer the second death—the lake of fire (2:11; 20:14). Only those who overcome will have their names inscribed in the book of life and wear white garments (3:5). Overcomers will inherit the promises, but those who don’t overcome will experience the second death (21:8). Hence, the call to overcome is a matter of utmost seriousness; life and death are at stake!

Those who stay morally awake and alert until the end will receive the garments of salvation (16:15). Those who belong to the Lamb are “called and chosen and faithful” (17:14). Those whose names are written in the book of life are judged according to works (20:11–15), works indicating that they belong to God. Revelation 12:17 describes believers as “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

The call to persevere should not, however, be interpreted as works-righteousness. The water of life is given freely to those who thirst (21:6; 22:17). But those who drink freely at the fountain of grace demonstrate that they have slaked their thirst by continuing to follow Christ to the end. As 12:11 says, “They have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.”

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

In a world where evil resists God and his Christ so that God’s people are harassed, reviled, imprisoned, and slain, the question of God’s sovereignty isn’t merely an academic matter. God declares at the outset and conclusion of Revelation that he rules over history, for he is the “Alpha and the Omega” and the “beginning and the end” (1:8; 21:6). Nothing that happens to God’s people comes as a surprise, nor is it outside his sovereign control. God reigns over all history as the one “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4, 8). John clearly draws on Exodus 3:14 and declares that God rules over the present, past, and future.

The sovereignty of God is expressed powerfully in chapter 4, which functions as an introduction to the remainder of the book after the letters to the churches in chapters 2–3. John allows us to peek into heaven itself, where God as the ever-holy one sits on his throne, ruling over all. The word “throne” plays a major role in Revelation, forty times referring to God’s or Christ’s throne. John wants his readers to know that God reigns and rules in heaven, for he is the creator of all (4:11), and the Creator is clearly sovereign. Here John reflects the theology of the OT, where God’s sovereignty as Creator is part of the warp and woof of its testimony.

Revelation’s portrayal of God’s sovereignty is no mere abstraction. What is striking and astonishing is God’s rule over the evil inflicted by the beast and the false prophet. John repeatedly tells readers the authority wielded by the beast and the false prophet “was given” (*edothē*) them by God (13:5, 7, 14, 15), including

activities like blaspheming God and murdering believers. God's goodness and holiness are not besmirched, as if he were evil (4:8), even though he rules over the evil unleashed in the world. The passive verb indicates God permitted evil to be done. It must be noted that God didn't *do* these evil deeds; they were the actions of the beast and false prophet. Yet they would have no authority to do such evil unless granted it from above (cf. John 19:11). Nevertheless, evil finally implodes and destroys itself from within. The beast and ten kings will finally turn against the harlot, Babylon, and utterly destroy her (Rev. 17:16). The hatred and destruction inflicted on Babylon stem from the beast and his cronies, yet God fulfills his purposes in these events (17:17). He even "put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose" (17:17).

God's sovereignty reminds believers they can take comfort in their sufferings. Even if they don't understand fully why they are suffering, they are assured that God is working out his purposes and plans in the evil intrigues of those opposed to him. Even though the evil they face is painful and agonizing, believers can trust their wise Father who watches over them. Satan and the beast aren't running out of control in their evil machinations; God always remains the sovereign one who rules over all things.

GOD PROTECTS HIS PEOPLE

In saying that God protects his people, I am not saying God prevents them from suffering. We have seen their intense suffering—believers are not spared even from death. Still, the Devil and the beast cannot do anything to the saints apart from the will of God. Even amid the storm, God superintends history. Indeed, the most frightening thing isn't martyrdom but the wrath of God. When his judgments are unleashed on the world, when the wrath of God and the Lamb are unveiled, no wicked person will be able to stand (6:16–17). Indeed, no one is "worthy" (*axios*; 5:2, 4) to be saved in and of himself (cf. "The Cross of Christ," below). Here we observe how God protects believers from his wrath. Immediately after asking who can withstand God's wrath (6:17), the author records the sealing of the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel (7:1–8). I argue in my comments on that passage that the 144,000 stand for all believers throughout history, both Jews and Gentiles. The main point of the passage is that it is the 144,000 who are sealed and protected by God from the day of wrath. Yes, believers will suffer, but their suffering is temporary, and they will be spared from God's eschatological wrath on the final day. The interpretation of 11:1 is also quite difficult, but the measuring of God's temple, altar, and those who worship there refers likely to the protection of God's people. Even though they suffer persecution (11:2), they are in God's hands and are shielded by him.

This same truth is expressed with a variety of symbols in Revelation. The 144,000 have the name of the Lamb and the Father on their foreheads (14:1). The name inscribed on the forehead means they belong to God and are under his protection (cf. 3:12). Similarly, the woman in chapter 12 (cf. comments) is another

way of describing the people of God. She is “nourished” by God in the wilderness for 1,260 days (12:6; cf. 11:3). The 1,260 days are equivalent to forty-two months (11:2; 13:5) or “time, and times, and half a time” (12:14), equal to three and one-half years, a span we read about elsewhere in Revelation. I suggest in the commentary that this period refers to the entire period between the resurrection and second coming. During this time period believers will be trampled and persecuted (11:2; 12:15–16), for the beast will be exercising his authority and blaspheming God (13:5). Still, even though the church is in the wilderness, God will protect and nourish his own (12:6), just as he protected Israel in the wilderness before they entered the Promised Land. The woman (the church of Jesus Christ) will be sustained on the wings of an eagle (12:14; cf. Ex. 19:4), and will be helped (Rev. 12:6) and not be overwhelmed (12:16). God thus exercises his sovereignty and love in shepherding his people during their sojourn in the wilderness. The church will be persecuted but will be delivered and preserved. She will be kept from the hour of testing striking the earth (3:10), not by being removed from the earth but by the grace of God sustaining her (cf. John 17:15; 1 Pet. 1:5).

GOD’S JUSTICE IN JUDGMENT

Revelation speaks much about the judgment of God, and the reader of the previous sections understands better why this is the case. Satan and his cohorts have rejected God, turned against truth, justice, and love, and pursued the saints with murderous intent. The earth dwellers have cast their lot with the prostitute Babylon instead of with the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Judgment will be meted out on those who have prostituted themselves, allying themselves with the city of man rather than the city of God.

Nor are believers exempt from the threat of judgment. The letters in chapters 2–3 warn of judgment if the churches don’t repent. God is impartial in judgment, pouring out his wrath on all who reject him. Judgment is featured especially in Revelation in the seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5), trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and bowls (16:1–21). It is not my purpose to rehearse these judgments in detail here. I would suggest (cf. comments on these passages) that God’s judgments stretch from the resurrection to the last day, culminating in the final judgment. The earth will finally be harvested like grapes trod in the winepress (14:17–20). The images of judgment are apocalyptic and all-encompassing. The judgment will leave no stone unturned—the entire world of earth, sky, and sea will be affected. The judgment is an expression of the wrath of God and the Lamb (6:16–17; 11:18; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15).

The final judgment is often introduced with a massive earthquake (6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18). Thunder and lightning are unleashed on the world (8:5; 11:19; 16:18). Battering hail descends from heaven (11:19; 16:21), and God’s temple is opened (11:19; 15:5). The entire cosmos falls apart (6:12–14), and the sky splits apart like a scroll (6:14). The islands and mountains of the world lose their moorings (6:14; 16:20). Even earth and heaven flee when God comes to judge (20:11).

These are all pictures of the end—of the dissolution of the old creation. John doesn't write literally but tries to convey the indescribable horror of the final judgment and God's wrath with vivid pictures of the world descending into chaos. The sixth seal (6:12–17), the seventh trumpet (11:15–19), and the seventh bowl all designate the end (16:17–21). After the judgment, the “kingdom of the world” will become the “kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (11:15). Then God's judgment will be “done” (16:17). It seems that the seals, trumpets, and bowls overlap one another in increasing intensity so that the bowls represent both the time near final judgment and final judgment itself.

God's judgments, as noted earlier, represent his sovereignty and indeed his goodness. Evil won't finally triumph over God and his holiness. The world has been besmirched and devastated by evil ever since Adam and Eve, but evil won't last forever. Its day is coming. Some wonder if God's judgments are righteous, but John pauses to emphasize that they are indeed righteous. God is just, giving the wicked what they deserve, for they shed the blood of God's saints (16:5–7). John realizes readers might wonder if fierce judgments are truly warranted, so he declares several times the righteousness of God's judgments. Before the final bowl judgments are poured out, John says, “Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations!” (15:3). The punishment fits the crime—the slaying of God's people (18:20–24). Or, as 19:2 says, “His judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.” The justice for which martyrs plead will finally be meted out (6:10). People are judged according to their works (20:11–15), and hence the judgment is fair and equitable. People are receiving recompense for what they have done (22:12). No one unclean can enter the city (21:27); those outside the gates are those who have given themselves to evil (22:15).

Hence, the saints don't question God's judgments but praise him for them. Those in heaven and on earth exclaim, “Hallelujah!” (19:1, 3). The saints cry out “Hallelujah” as the smoke of Babylon “goes up forever and ever” (19:3), for evil has been destroyed and they have been vindicated. The final judgment lasts forever, for those who worship the beast (14:9) are “tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (14:10). The judgment cannot be restricted to annihilation, for it isn't just the *smoke* ascending forever. Instead, those punished are tormented forever—“They have no rest, day or night” (14:11). They will experience conscious punishment in the lake of fire, the second death, where the Devil, the beast, and the false prophet find their eternal home (19:20; 20:10), for the second death is the lake of fire (20:14).

THE DEITY OF CHRIST

One of the striking features in Revelation is its extraordinarily high Christology. It rivals the Gospel of John—perhaps another indication that John is the author. One parallel with the Gospel of John leaps out, for Jesus is called the “Word of God” (19:13), echoing the Gospel of John, in which Jesus is the “Word”

(John 1:1, 14). Jesus is also identified at the outset as the “ruler of kings on earth” (Rev. 1:5), showing he shares the same rule and sovereignty as God. Three times Jesus identifies himself as the “first and the last” (1:17; 2:8; 22:13), and in the latter verse he also says “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” Only Yahweh is the first and last (cf. Isa. 44:6; 48:12), and elsewhere in Revelation God declares that he himself is the “Alpha and the Omega” (Rev. 1:8)—thus Jesus shares the stature of God as the sovereign one over all. The Roman Empire does not ultimately rule over the saints. Instead, Jesus rules over the kings of the earth, thus they cannot do anything apart from his will. Believers can put their entire trust in him, for he is “Faithful and True” (19:11).

The sovereignty of Jesus and therefore his divinity pervade the book. Jesus comforts the suffering church by affirming that he holds the “keys of Death and Hades” (1:18). He also holds the seven stars in his hands (2:1), ruling over the angels of the seven churches. When Jesus opens a door, no one can shut it; when he shuts the door, no one can open it (3:7). Chapter 5 emphasizes that no one is “worthy” to open the seven-sealed book except Jesus Christ. In other words, the key to history and to the history of redemption is Jesus Christ.

We find astonishing parallels between God and the Lamb, indicating that the Lamb is equal to God. Sinners beg to be hidden from the presence of God on the throne, but they also plead to be spared from the “wrath of the Lamb” (6:16). Salvation is attributed both to God and to the Lamb (7:10). The divine stature of Jesus is apparent when John says, “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water” (7:17). Psalm 23 says Yahweh is the shepherd, leading his own to quiet waters (Ps. 23:1–2), and John assigns the same role to the Lamb, demonstrating that he is Lord of all. We are also told that the Lamb is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev. 17:14; cf. 19:16), again showing Jesus enjoying the same sovereignty as God. The apostles belong to the Lamb (21:14), and both God and the Lamb are the new temple (21:22). Similarly, the new creation is illumined by both God and the Lamb (21:23; 22:5). The river of life comes from both God and the Lamb (22:1), and God and the Lamb both sit on the throne (22:3). The equivalent status of God and the Lamb is strikingly apparent. The kingdom of the world is given to the Lord and to the Christ (11:15; cf. 20:6). Just as God as Creator is worshiped in chapter 4 (4:9–11), so Christ as Redeemer is worshiped in chapter 5 (5:9–14). Just as God is worthy (4:11), so the Lamb is worthy (5:9, 12).

Jesus is the beginning and head of the new creation (3:14), the living one, the resurrected Lord (1:18; 2:8). Jesus’ rule is due not only to his divinity but also to his humanity. Jesus fulfills the promise of the Davidic covenant (cf. 2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalms 89; 132) as the root of David (Rev. 5:5; cf. Isa. 11:1, 10). As the Davidic king, he will rule the world with an iron rod (Rev. 12:5; cf. Ps. 2:9), and when he comes again he will destroy God’s enemies (Rev. 19:11–21).

Jesus is also the glorious Son of Man, as we see from the stunning vision in chapter 1 (Rev. 1:12–18). As the Son of Man, he is a human being, for he has died

and risen (1:18). But he is also divine, for his hair is white (1:14), just as Yahweh's is (Dan. 7:9). His glory is so great that John faints in his presence (Rev. 1:17).

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Revelation doesn't depart from the witness of the remainder of the NT: the glory of the person of Jesus Christ is revealed also in his sacrifice on the cross. John emphasizes in arresting ways the centrality of the cross. In chapter 4 we see God as Creator worshiped in the heavenly throne room. We find in chapter 5 God holding a sealed book that no one is worthy to open. John weeps, for if no one can open the book, no one can be saved and God's purposes for human beings will be unrealized. But then John is told that the Lion from the tribe of Judah "has conquered" and can open the seals (5:5). When John looks, however, he sees not a Lion but a slain and risen Lamb (5:6), indicating that Jesus conquered through his suffering, through his death on the cross. Peace and justice were accomplished not by overwhelming force but through suffering love.

God intended human beings to become kings and priests—kings to rule the world for God and priests to mediate his blessing to the world. Christ through his blood redeemed human beings and made them such kings and priests, so that the goal for which he made human beings would be realized (5:9–10). People will enter the heavenly city only if their robes are white (3:4–5, 18; 7:9, 13; 19:14), but the robes become white in a surprising way—through the red blood of the Lamb shed for them (7:14). Robes don't normally become white by being reddened, but these robes do!

Chapter 12 depicts war in heaven between Satan and his angels and Michael the archangel and his angels. Satan was evicted from heaven, losing his platform for accusing human beings. But how do we explain Satan's defeat, and why can he no longer lodge accusations against humans? The answer is found again in the blood of the Lamb (12:11). Satan is conquered (cf. 5:5!) and defeated because of the death of Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus' death, believers have no fear of condemnation, having been cleansed of their guilt through the cross. No accusation can stand against them, for the Lamb has redeemed them from their sins.

We have seen in chapters 5 and 12 (pivotal chapters in Revelation) that victory and triumph come only through the cross. And the book *begins* this way as well. John declares that Jesus "freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5). We see here again that human beings are liberated to serve as priests and kings (1:6). The fundamental need for human beings is forgiveness, by which they are cleansed and restored to their proper function. All praise is given to the Lamb for such restoration, as we hear in the resounding words of the angels, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (5:12).

THE CENTRALITY OF WORSHIP

One of the striking themes of Revelation is worship. It isn't my purpose here to examine this theme in any detail. We simply want to observe its prominence, for

we have seen most of these themes elsewhere. The majesty and holiness of God as Creator are featured in chapter 4, the angels responding with worship and praise. The worship of God here echoes the worship of the seraphim in Isaiah 6, giving praise to God as thrice holy (Isa. 6:1–3). Similarly, in Revelation 5 all of creation worships and praises Jesus as the Lion and the Lamb, the one who has redeemed his people and opened the book with seven seals. In 7:10–12 angelic powers give praise to God and to Lamb for the salvation of the great multitude. The twenty-four elders fall face down and worship God for commencing his reign, rewarding his saints, and judging those who are evil (Rev. 11:16–18). Those who triumph over the beast also sing the song of Moses (15:2–4), showing the salvation in Jesus Christ fulfilling old covenant promises. They praise God for his awesome works, rule over all, righteous and true ways, and holiness. God alone is acknowledged as the holy one, the one before whom all will bow because of his righteousness. God is also praised for his righteous judgment on those who practice evil. The saints and angels voice their praise to God for judging the harlot, Babylon (18:20; 19:1, 3, 4). God is praised for his justice, salvation, glory, and power. The saints are full of praise because God’s kingdom has come and the marriage of the bride has occurred (19:5–8).

Finally, on two occasions Revelation insists that only God is to be worshiped (19:10; 22:8–9). John was tempted to worship a glorious angel, but such worship is reserved for the one true God alone. Restricting worship to God constitutes further evidence for the deity of Jesus Christ, for John, as we saw above, clearly teaches that Jesus is to be worshiped, and hence it follows that Jesus Christ shares in the divine identity.

THE WONDER OF THE NEW CREATION

Believers in Jesus Christ are promised they will enjoy the new creation, the new heaven and new earth, the heavenly Jerusalem. The future glory promised to believers is described in a variety of ways, and it is important to recognize the symbolism of the language. For instance, those who enter the new creation will worship God in his temple day and night (7:15). Believers will be a “pillar in the temple” (3:12). Yet there isn’t a temple in the new creation, for the Lord and the Lamb are its temple (21:22). In 21:1–22:5, John often alludes to the temple described in Ezekiel 40–48, yet he says there is no temple. Thus we see the temple prophesied in Ezekiel 40–48 wasn’t intended to predict the future building of a literal temple. It represented the dwelling place of God, and at the consummation of history the entire universe—the entire heavenly city—is God’s dwelling place. The precious gems in the heavenly city also remind us of the tabernacle and temple (Rev. 21:10–11, 19–21). The city is a perfect cube (21:16), like the Most Holy Place in the temple (1 Kings 6:20), showing that the city is God’s residence, his dwelling place. The most important aspect of the new creation is fellowship with God. He dwells with his people so that they can see his face and revel in his presence forevermore (Rev. 21:3; 22:4).

The pain and sorrow of the present world will be erased forever, for God will make everything wondrously new (7:17; 21:4–5). Thus it makes sense that those who die in the Lord from now on are blessed (14:13). The saints will slake their thirst in the new creation in the fountain of living waters (7:17; 21:6). The new creation is described as a wedding feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7–10). The wedding will be consummated, and the saints' joy will be "inexpressible and filled with glory," for the city will radiate with the glory of God (1 Pet. 1:8; Rev. 21:10–11). The city is safe and impregnable, having a high wall (Rev. 21:12)—no one can attack those within. The language is clearly symbolic, however, for the gates of the city are also always open (21:25); there is no use for a wall if the gates are always open! But the high wall and open gates communicate the same truth: the residents of the city cannot be harmed by anything; the city is secure from any and every marauder.

The city consists of the one people of God throughout the ages, having the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on its gates and the twelve apostles on its foundation stones (21:12–14). The city is founded on the teaching of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20) and consists of all believers everywhere. The number twelve is clearly symbolic. The city is 12,000 stadia long (Rev. 21:16), and the wall is 144 (12×12) cubits high (21:17). Remarkably, John tells us that this is the measurement of an angel but that no one knows how angels measure! Thus we have another indication of John writing symbolically, not literally.

The beginning of God's creation in Genesis is reflected in the end: there is a tree of life in the city for healing (22:2), but this does not imply that people will need healing, for there are no diseases there. The tree of life symbolizes the perfect wholeness the saints enjoy in the city. The nations bring their glory into the city (21:24–25)—everything beautiful and lovely from the present creation will be in the new creation. Still, what makes the city so desirable is God himself and the Lamb, for they are the light of the city and the light of our lives (21:23).

Relationship to the Rest of the Bible and to Christ

Revelation concludes the story of the Bible. God created Adam and Eve to rule the world for him, in dependence upon him. In doing so they would reflect his glory and beauty. Adam and Eve, however, turned against God and arrogated to themselves glory and honor belonging to the Creator. They worshiped the creature (themselves) rather than the Creator, violating God's command. As a result the world was plunged into sin, and death followed as a consequence of sin.

Still, God promised salvation would come through the offspring of the woman (Gen. 3:15). This promise of salvation was then channeled through one man and one nation: Abraham and Israel. God promised offspring, land, and universal blessing to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3). The promises took a long time to be fulfilled, both in Abraham's life and in the nation. By the time of the exodus Israel was exploding as a nation, thus the promise of offspring was being fulfilled. God liberated Israel from Egyptian slavery under Moses and entered into a covenant with them.

Israel regularly violated the covenant, but God graciously brought them into the Promised Land under Joshua's leadership.

Israel was poised to experience universal blessing, but they started walking backward. In the days of the judges they began living like the Canaanites they had dispossessed. Still, God continued to forgive them when they repented, and Saul was crowned as their first king. Would he be the king through whom blessing would come? Instead, Saul's career mirrored Israel's. At first he seemed to be the answer to Israel's problems, but he turned away from following the Lord and pursued his own inclinations. The Lord had promised blessing would come through a king (e.g., Gen. 17:6, 16; 35:11; 49:10; Num. 24:17), but it was apparent Saul was not that king.

A king after God's own heart was anointed: David. David was dramatically different from Saul, for he followed the Lord, obeying him even when suffering unjustly at Saul's hand. God promised David's dynasty would last forever, and the universal blessing promised to the world would come through David's son. The blessing couldn't come through David, as great as he was, for he showed himself to be a sinner. Neither was Solomon the final promised king, for his heart was bewitched by idols in his later years. Indeed, the promised blessing for Israel wasn't secured under any of the kings of Judah or Israel. Instead, the north and the south both defected from the Lord and ended in exile—in 722 and 586 BC, respectively.

What happened to the promise? Israel was going backward. They weren't even in their own land! God promised through the prophets that a "day of the Lord" was coming when he would save his people and judge the wicked. The covenant with David would be fulfilled, and his salvation and righteousness would be revealed to all peoples. A new exodus, a new covenant, a new creation, and a new David would come.

The Gospels reveal that Jesus of Nazareth fulfills the promises made to Abraham and David. Most of Israel in Jesus' day didn't recognize him as the Messiah, but he was the son of David, the Son of Man of Daniel 7, and the servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53. He was God's true Son. Still, the promises were fulfilled in an astonishing way. Jesus the Christ was slain for the sin of his people and raised for their justification (cf. Rom. 4:25). As the rest of the NT makes plain, salvation belongs to those who put their trust in Jesus Christ, who give their lives to him. The Epistles unpack theologically what Jesus Christ has done for his people and what it means to live to the glory of God after the great saving work accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The book of Revelation is a fitting consummation to the story. John teaches us that good will triumph and evil will be dethroned. Jesus conquered sin, death, and Satan through his cross and resurrection, but the church in this world still faces these foes, and often it seems that Satan and evil have triumphed. Revelation teaches that evil will not finally conquer. Jesus Christ is the crucified and risen Lord, and he rules over all. His kingdom will come in its fullness, and his purposes will

be realized. Those who oppose him will regret it, for they will be dethroned and judged. The pleasures of Babylon and idolatry are short-lived. Satan, the beast, the false prophet, and those who give themselves to worshiping them and the things of this world will be judged. Victory is sure; Satan will soon be crushed under Jesus' feet (cf. Rom. 16:20). Hence the suffering church must take courage and endure to the end. They must keep trusting and relying on the Lord. They must remember that the Lamb who was slain also rules over all. Those who persevere will receive the final reward, for the new creation is most certainly coming, and the bliss and joy of those who know the Lord and the Lamb will never end. Jesus is coming again, and all his promises will come to fruition.

Preaching from Revelation

Too often those who preach from Revelation have used it as a prophecy chart, which is alien to the message of the book. They have fallen into the trap of newspaper eschatology instead of biblical eschatology. Unfortunately, those who don't follow such an approach have often gone to the other extreme and avoided preaching from Revelation altogether, but such an approach is equally mistaken, for God has given us the book for our instruction in edification and holiness.

Revelation is a recursive book, meaning the same themes are examined again and again. We don't have a linear story that begins in chapter 1 and ends in chapter 22. The story begins and ends a number of times, and hence preachers must be sensitive to the literary structure of the book when proclaiming it. Still, there is great benefit in preaching through the entire book. If one uses this approach, I would suggest taking large chunks of the text in each sermon. For instance, when I preached the book I preached twenty-seven messages.

Another way to preach the book is via the themes presented above. For instance, one could do a series on worship, the cross of Christ, God's judgments, the seven letters to the churches, the need to persevere, etc. We want to impress on our churches that the theology of Revelation fits the rest of the NT. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of what is prophesied in the OT, and the fulcrum of history is the cross. Those who give themselves to Jesus Christ and persevere to the end will be saved. Conversely, those who give themselves over to evil will be judged.

When we untangle the apocalyptic language in the book, we don't find anything radically new in the message of Revelation. All the themes in the book are present elsewhere in the NT. Still, this isn't to say the genre is dispensable. We want to communicate the genre in our preaching, for the apocalyptic genre arrests us and transports us from our present existence, reminding us of a world to come—a world beyond our senses. The apocalyptic genre reminds us that awesome issues are at stake, showing us that evil is lurid and dreadful while goodness is beautiful and beyond our imagination. Apocalypse seizes our imaginations and hearts, transporting us to another world—the world awaiting the faithful. In our preaching

we should try to capture the transcendent message of the book and underscore the life-and-death issues at stake.

It is also helpful to preach Revelation because it is the culmination of the story of the Bible. Hence, when we preach Revelation we should show our hearers that it is infused with OT themes and allusions. The book doesn't depart from the OT witness but fulfills it. Finally, in preaching Revelation we preach Jesus Christ: the book reveals him (1:1; cf. comment), and any faithful preaching of the book will feature Jesus as the crucified and risen one. In other words, we preach Revelation well only if we proclaim the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Interpretive Challenges

The symbolism of Revelation presents interpretive challenges, and probably no other book in the NT is more disputed interpretively than Revelation. Four different interpretive approaches have played a major role in the history of the church, as represented in table 9.2 in a simplified way.

TABLE 9.2: Interpretive Approaches to Revelation

Preterist	Fulfilled entirely or mainly in the first century
Historicist	Fulfilled in stages throughout church history
Idealist	Fundamentally symbolic
Futurist	Fulfilled mainly in future

The preterist view argues that Revelation was mainly or entirely fulfilled in the first century. The strength of this view is how it takes seriously the historical context in which Revelation was birthed. John wrote Revelation to readers in the first century, and the book addressed their concerns, hopes, and fears. The preterist view can be divided into liberal and evangelical camps. Those who are liberal theologically maintain that Revelation promised Jesus would come soon and destroy the Roman Empire, but these promises were not actually fulfilled, and hence John got it wrong. Most evangelical preterists, on the other hand, maintain Revelation was written before AD 70 and the events prophesied in Revelation are fulfilled mainly in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The liberal preterist view, though it rightly sees the historical context in which Revelation was written, fails to understand the nature of biblical prophecy, in which contemporary fulfillment anticipates a future and final fulfillment. It also wrongly asserts that biblical writers have erred, and such a theological judgment should be rejected for a variety of reasons that can't be detailed here.

The evangelical preterist view has several problems. First, it demands that the book was written before AD 70, yet most scholars and the preponderance of the evidence suggest a date in the 90s. The most common evangelical preterist view is precarious, for the book *must* be written before AD 70 for its interpreta-

tion to succeed. Second, the events recorded by Josephus concerning Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 are often forced upon Revelation by preterists, instead of their interpreting the text more naturally. Third, evangelical preterists identify Jerusalem as Babylon, but we have no other instance where Jerusalem is called Babylon, whereas elsewhere Babylon designates Rome (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13). Finally, the evangelical preterist view reads the book in terms of the destruction of Jerusalem but doesn't handle well the many texts that speak universally, in which judgment is not limited to Babylon but encompasses the entire world.

The historicist view reads the book of Revelation as if it were a prophecy of the entirety of church history. Such a reading was especially popular in classical dispensationalism and was applied especially to the letters in chapters 2 and 3. Almost all dispensational interpreters today, however, have abandoned this approach, and few scholars support it, for church history must be forced to fit into the seven letters, or the rest of Revelation for that matter. It seems that this view survives in only a few circles.

The idealist view understands Revelation in broad categories, seeing in Jesus Christ the triumph of God and the defeat of the Devil and God's enemies. Interpreters have been attracted to this approach, for it isn't guilty of the arbitrary readings littering the history of the church. The idealist approach rightly sees the main message of the book, but it has been criticized for being too general and vague. Almost all would agree with the general message it detects in the book, but some of the gritty details in the book are sacrificed.

The futurist view is probably the most popular in evangelical circles today. The last century has been dominated by dispensational futurist readings, where Israel is sharply distinguished from the church and Revelation 4–22 takes place after the rapture of the church. Much of Revelation, then, records (according to this view) what happens in the seven years of tribulation before the second coming of Christ, his millennial reign on earth, and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth. Not all futurists, however, are dispensationalists. In recent years major commentaries have been written by scholars such as Robert Mounce, George Eldon Ladd, and Grant Osborne from a futurist stance, but none of these scholars is dispensational. It will become apparent in the course of the commentary why I reject a dispensational reading of the book, but space is lacking to interact with that view here. Only two problems with the dispensational view should be noted here. First, there is no evidence that the church is raptured before chapter 4. Such a reading must be imposed upon the text. Second, the sharp distinction between Israel and the church postulated by dispensationalists cannot be supported by a careful reading of Revelation.

Not all futurists, as noted above, are dispensationalists, for many today identify themselves as historic premillennialists, inasmuch as a number of early church fathers who were not dispensational believed in a future millennial reign of Christ on earth. The futurist view rightly sees the book relating to the end of history, but in some instances it falls prey to speculation and dangerous fantasies. In popular

circles (e.g., the writings of Hal Lindsey and the novels of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins)⁸ speculation runs rampant, and the meaning of Revelation is subverted by modern agendas. Still, the futurist approach reminds us that God reigns over history and will fulfill his promises in the future.

The approach taken in this commentary is a combination of the preterist, idealist, and futurist views. Revelation was written to churches in the first century, who understood and were edified and challenged by the book. The idealist view rightly sees the prophecies as consisting of patterns and correspondences, so that what was prophesied relates both to the first century and to all churches throughout history until God consummates his purposes and plans. I will argue that the patterned or correspondence character of the prophecy helps us see how the words of Revelation spoke to the first century, the church throughout history, our time, and the end of the ages. At the same time, an idealist view must also incorporate the future into its reading, for John forecasts also the denouement of God's purposes in history.

Outline

I will argue in the commentary that Revelation has a recursive structure. In other words, the book often comes to the end of history (e.g., 6:12–17; 7:15–17; 11:15–19; 14:1–5, 14–20; 16:17–21) and begins again. Hence, the book isn't like most epistles, with a logical structure that is unfolded. Nor is it a linear book like Genesis, which proceeds in chronological order. Interestingly, though the genre is entirely different, the book in some ways reminds us of 1 John, in which John articulates themes and then circles back to reflect on them again, continuing this method throughout the letter.

- I. Introduction (1:1–20)
 - A. Prologue: (1:1–8)
 - B. Vision of the Son of Man (1:9–20)
- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)
 - A. Ephesus (2:1–7)
 - B. Smyrna (2:8–11)
 - C. Pergamum (2:12–17)
 - D. Thyatira (2:18–29)
 - E. Sardis (3:1–6)
 - F. Philadelphia (3:7–13)
 - G. Laodicea (3:14–22)
- III. Visions in the Throne Room (4:1–5:14)
 - A. God as the Holy Creator (4:1–11)
 - B. The Lamb as Redeemer (5:1–14)
- IV. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5)
 - A. The First Six Seals (6:1–17)

⁸ The indictment of LaHaye and Jenkins applies only if the eschatology underlying their novels is embraced as true to Scripture.

- B. Interlude (7:1–17)
 - 1. Sealing of the 144,000 (7:1–8)
 - 2. Salvation of an Uncountable Multitude (7:9–17)
- C. The Seventh Seal and the Seven Trumpets (8:1–5)
- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19)
 - A. The First Four Trumpets: Cosmic Destruction (8:6–13)
 - B. Fifth Trumpet: Demonic Locust Plague (9:1–12)
 - C. Sixth Trumpet: Demonic Cavalry (9:13–21)
 - D. Interlude (10:1–11:14)
 - 1. Renewed Call to Prophesy (10:1–11)
 - 2. Temple Protected (11:1–2)
 - 3. Two Witnesses Empowered, Killed, and Vindicated (11:3–14)
 - E. The Seventh Trumpet: Kingdom Come! (11:15–19)
- VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20)
 - A. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1–6)
 - B. War in Heaven: The Devil Expelled (12:7–12)
 - C. The Woman: Persecuted and Protected (12:13–17)
 - D. Two Beasts (13:1–18)
 - E. The 144,000 on Mount Zion (14:1–5)
 - F. Three Angels (14:6–13)
 - G. Two Harvests (14:14–20)
- VII. The Seven Bowls from the Sanctuary (15:1–16:21)
 - A. The Sanctuary and the Song (15:1–8)
 - B. The Seven Bowls (16:1–21)
- VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride (17:1–19:10)
 - A. The Harlot Babylon Destroyed (17:1–18)
 - B. The Declarations of Two Angels (18:1–8)
 - C. Lamentation over Babylon's Fall (18:9–19)
 - D. Rejoicing over Babylon's Fall (18:20–19:5)
 - E. Rejoicing over the Marriage of the Lamb (19:6–10)
- IX. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15)
 - A. Defeat of the Beast, the False Prophet, and Their Adherents (19:11–21)
 - B. Reigning with Jesus for a Thousand Years (20:1–6)
 - C. The Last Battle (20:7–10)
 - D. The Last Judgment (20:11–15)
- X. The New Heavens and New Earth (21:1–22:5)
 - A. All Things New (21:1–8)
 - B. The Bride and the Holy City (21:9–22:5)
- XI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

A simplified structure of Revelation is presented in table 9.3.

TABLE 9.3: A Simplified Structure of Revelation

chs. 1–3	Letters to the seven churches
chs. 4–5	Throne room vision
chs. 6–7	Seven seals
chs. 8–11	Seven trumpets
chs. 12–14	Visions of heaven and earth
chs. 15–16	Seven bowls
17:1–19:10	The fall of Babylon
19:11–22:21	The consummation and the new heaven and new earth

REVELATION 1:1–8

1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants¹ the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near. ⁴John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood ⁶and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail² on account of him. Even so. Amen.

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

¹For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface; likewise for *servant* later in this verse ²Or *mourn*

Section Overview

The structure of the prologue is somewhat loose, with no linear progression of the argument as in many epistles. The book is introduced (Rev. 1:1–3), followed by a grace greeting (vv. 4–6), and then John closes with two solemn statements (vv. 7–8) emphasizing God’s sovereignty. The prologue has an earnest and impressive character from the first words to the last. The importance of reading and obeying the

book is underscored (v. 3), and John twice punctuates what he says with “Amen” (vv. 6, 7). The sovereignty, majesty, and greatness of God and Jesus Christ pulsate through the prologue, and readers are provoked to see that the message conveyed is of utmost importance.

Section Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–20)
 - A. Prologue: (1:1–8)

Comment

1:1 The book of Revelation is about Jesus Christ, for in it he is revealed. The phrase “revelation of Jesus Christ” could mean a revelation *about* Jesus Christ or a revelation *given by* Jesus Christ. It clearly means the latter, for John tells us that God “gave” the revelation to Jesus. For some that settles the issue, but given the contents of the remainder of the book, and given what is said about Jesus Christ even in the prologue, we should not opt for an either-or here. The revelation both is given by Jesus Christ *and* centers on Jesus. The word “revelation” indicates that God’s purpose in history is unveiled or disclosed to us in what John writes. We see from the outset that the book of Revelation is *about* Jesus Christ, and its contents are given *by* him.

The revelation was sent to show God’s “servants,” i.e., believers, what will take place “soon.” After two thousand years we wonder what these words mean, for John consistently affirms the nearness of the fulfillment (cf. 1:3; 22:6). Jesus promises to come “soon” (2:16; 22:7, 12, 20). Many scholars have argued that John got it wrong. They say the word “soon” means soon, but it didn’t happen, and that’s that. But as I will show below, the matter isn’t as simple as this, and there are good reasons for thinking the word “soon” isn’t contradicted by the two thousand years of history that have passed without the return of Jesus. Some preterists have said the word—ing relates to AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem. But this latter view hardly works, for Revelation doesn’t focus on Israel and Jerusalem, and it strains belief to think Jesus’ coming can be identified with Jerusalem being destroyed.

The discussion at this point could become quite involved, but several things must be said. First, “soon” is a relative term, for what it means depends on one’s perspective. Peter tells us that one day with the Lord is like a thousand years (2 Pet. 3:8). Two thousand years—i.e., two days, so to speak—have elapsed since Jesus was enthroned on high. Second, biblical prophecy is marked by the tension we find here. For instance, if one reads Isaiah 40–66 carefully, it is evident that God promises a new exodus—the return from Babylon. Isaiah gives every impression that, when the new exodus occurs, the new creation will dawn (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), the Spirit will be given (Isa. 44:3), and all of God’s promises will be fulfilled. But it didn’t happen that way. Israel returned from exile, but their place in the world was still rather pitiful. Did Isaiah get it wrong? Remarkably, Jesus and the apostles didn’t think so. They didn’t reject Isaiah’s testimony even though it seemed as if

he promised everything would be fulfilled when Israel returned from exile. They recognized the complexity of Isaiah's vision. The restoration was inaugurated but not consummated in the reign of Cyrus, and Jesus and his apostles believed the full and final fulfillment was still to come. The appropriation of Isaiah by Jesus and the apostles functions as a model to us today in interpreting prophecy and the coming of Jesus Christ.

Similarly, Jeremiah prophesied Israel would return from exile in seventy years (Jer. 25:12; 29:10), and when one reads Jeremiah 30–33 it seems the new covenant would be inaugurated, the Davidic king would reign, right sacrifices would be offered, and Israel would prosper (Jer. 31:31–34; 33:17–26). It is quite obvious, however, that Jeremiah's prophecy wasn't realized in its fullness at the return from Babylon in the time of Ezra. Indeed, the Lord reveals to Daniel that the completion of God's plans won't be realized until seventy sevens take place (Dan. 9:24–27). We have a precedent, then, in OT prophecy. The imminence of the fulfillment must not be understood simplistically or narrowly. Jesus could return in any generation, yet there is no guarantee enabling us to pin down when he will come.

Third, we need to remember that the last days have arrived with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:16–17; Heb. 1:2). The last hour has now come (1 John 2:18), and thus the end is imminent, and has been for two thousand years. Every generation has rightly said Jesus is coming soon, because all the great redemptive events needed for him to return have been accomplished.

The revelation was mediated to John through an angel, and one of the features of apocalyptic literature is the conveyance of a transcendent message from an angel or another important person. John here is probably the apostle (cf. Introduction), and his designation as a servant indicates his humility but also his stature, for Moses (Num. 12:7–8; Josh. 1:1–2),⁹ Joshua (Judg. 2:8), and other godly men (Dan. 9:6, 10; Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6) were designated as servants in the OT. The words “made it known” (*sēmmainō*), of which Jesus is probably the subject (though the subject may be the Father), stem from a verb (cf. Dan. 2:45 LXX) pointing to the symbolic nature of the revelation given to John (cf. John 12:33; 18:32; 21:19; Acts 11:28), though the symbolism of the book is evident from its content, in any case.

1:2 The message John conveys in the book is the “word of God,” which means it is God's message for the churches. John also witnesses to the “testimony of Jesus Christ,” which is probably appositional to “word of God,” signifying that God's word centers on Jesus Christ. The phrase “testimony of Jesus” is used with reference to the faithfulness of believers in 12:17 and 20:4, referring to those who persevere despite the opposition they face. The phrase is also used in 19:10 to designate the essence of prophecy. In each instance, the focus is on the testimony *about* Jesus, though in 1:2 we may have another example of a both-and, where the testimony is both *about* Jesus and *given by* Jesus. The message of Revelation consists of the word of God, and God's word centers especially on Christ. John also tells us he

⁹ Moses is called the servant of the Lord more than thirty times.

saw the message contained in the book, and hence we can deduce that the message of the book was transmitted through visions. John uses the verb “see” more than fifty times to indicate what was revealed to him.¹⁰ The reception of visions is characteristic of apocalyptic literature, and hence we have another indication of the imagistic character of the book.

1:3 There are seven statements of blessing in Revelation; both the one reading the book aloud and those hearing and obeying its message are promised a blessing (see table 9.4).

TABLE 9.4: The Seven Blessings in Revelation

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it . . .	1:3
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.	14:13
Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on . . .	16:15
Blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.	19:9
Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection.	20:6
Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.	22:7
Blessed are those who wash their robes.	22:14

Given the significance of numbers in Revelation, and especially the import of the number seven (fifty-five occurrences), it seems significant that there are seven blessings. The sevenfold blessing probably signifies completeness and fullness in the blessing promised. The contents of the blessings all relate to future reward promised to believers, to bliss they will experience after a period of testing.

Here the blessing is promised to the one who reads the book aloud and to those who hear and keep it. We see here that the book was read out loud to the churches receiving it. The oral impact of the book is slighted in Western cultures, where the reading of Scripture in church is confined to brief passages, and most private reading is silent. We can imagine, however, the impact this stunning book had on those who first heard its message. Blessing comes from hearing the message of the book, but hearing alone doesn’t bring blessing, for hearing must be accompanied by obeying. The book of Revelation isn’t merely information; it shouldn’t be confused with a prophecy chart. The book calls upon its readers to act, to heed the message conveyed, and we shall see the focus is on the call to persevere to the end. The message must be attended to, since the “time is near” (1:3).¹¹ Readers must not compromise with the world and grow lackadaisical, as if they had plenty of time to respond. The call to obedience is urgent and must be heeded immediately. We should also note that the message of the book is also designated as “prophecy.”

¹⁰ Cf. Revelation 1:12, 17, 19, 20; 4:1; 5:1, 2, 6, 11; 6:1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12; 7:1, 2, 9; 8:2, 13; 9:1, 17; 10:1, 5; 13:1, 2, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2, 5; 16:13; 17:3, 6, 8, 12, 15, 16, 18; 18:1; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1, 2, 22.

¹¹ For the significance of the nearness of the time, cf. comment on 1:1.

The book isn't limited to apocalypse but is also prophetic in nature. We could say that the book is prophetic-apocalyptic.

1:4 The epistolary character of the book now surfaces as John writes to seven churches. The seven churches are named in 1:11, and thus are not merely symbolic but rather real churches in particular locations in the Greco-Roman world. The historical character of John's writing is apparent from the reference to Asia, a Roman province in the western part of what is today Turkey. Emperor worship was quite common during the first century in the province of Asia, and hence, as we shall see, John's message was directed to concrete circumstances in the life of the churches. Still, the number seven seems to have symbolic import as well, for the message ultimately isn't limited to the seven churches but applies to all churches throughout history.

As is typical in Christian letters, we find a grace wish (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3) extended to the readers. In this instance the grace wish concludes in verse 6 with a doxology. What is particularly striking is the Trinitarian nature of the grace wish, for the Father, Spirit, and Son are all mentioned. No other grace wish in the NT includes the Spirit, making this one distinctive.

The prayer for grace also includes peace. Grace refers to God's gracious favor granted freely from the abundance of his love, while peace centers on the right relationship with God belonging to believers as a result of God's grace. Here the focus is on the subjective experience of that peace, since Christians are already in a right relationship with God. Believers continue to need God's grace and peace daily, especially when they face persecution and discrimination from the world. Hence John prays that they will know God's grace and peace from the Father, Spirit, and Son.

Grace and peace come first from the Father, who is designated as the one "who is and who was and who is to come." John alludes to Exodus 3:14, where the Lord reveals his name to Moses by declaring, "I AM WHO I AM." In Exodus Yahweh discloses himself as the everlasting God who reigns over heaven and earth, and as the covenant God faithful to his people and his promises to them (cf. Ex. 6:3–8). Isaiah particularly picks up on the "I am" formula from Exodus (e.g., Isa. 41:4, 10; 42:8; 43:3, 5, 10, 11, 25).¹² Isaiah emphasizes Yahweh as Israel's Creator, Lord, and Savior in a situation where Israel fears it will never be liberated from exile but instead will be swallowed up by Babylon forever. So too John in Revelation calls attention to the greatness of God. He "is"—i.e., he reigns over the world and the church, even though the Roman Empire contests his lordship. He "was"—he has always been the sovereign Lord of history. There has never been a time he was not mighty God of the entire creation. He is the "coming one"—he is coming to establish his rule over the world in a new and decisive way. Yes, God has always been King and Lord, but the fullness and completeness of his reign has not yet

¹² Isaiah does not always use the exact wording of the formula, but he still alludes to Exodus 3:14, as is evident in the content of his prophecies.

been realized or acknowledged. He is coming to judge the wicked, vindicate the righteous, and bring about the new creation. We may think it odd to speak of the Father as coming, for isn't Jesus Christ the "coming one" rather than the Father? We should note that this very same phrase is used of the Father in Revelation 1:8 and again in 4:8. Since Jesus Christ appears at the end of the grace wish in 1:5, the Father is obviously in view here in 1:4. In one sense, we should not be surprised that the Father is declared the "coming one," for even though the Son comes physically, what is true of the Son is true also of the Father. In Trinitarian terms, we call this *coinherence*. The members of the Trinity inhere in one another; the action of one member can be predicated also of another. Hence the judgment of the Son is the judgment of the Father as well (John 8:16), and the love of the Son represents the love of the Father also.

Grace and peace aren't only from the Father but are also from the "seven spirits who are before his throne." The phrase "seven spirits" occurs three other times in Revelation (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). Some doubt this is a reference to the Holy Spirit, since Jesus possesses the seven spirits (3:1) and the burning torches are also called the seven spirits (4:5). Some think the reference is to the seven angels of God or to seven archangels, for the word "spirit" often refers to angels. I will argue that each instance is actually a reference to the Holy Spirit.¹³ In this verse, a reference to the Holy Spirit is particularly persuasive. It is difficult to see how grace and peace can come from anyone but God himself. It is also quite striking in reading the NT that grace and peace are never said to come from a human being; we never read of grace and peace coming from the apostle John or Paul or anyone else. Nor do we ever find grace and peace coming from an angel or an exalted person from the past, such as Moses or Elijah. Grace and peace always come from God himself, and thus it makes most sense to see the "seven spirits" here in 1:4 as referring to the Holy Spirit. The "seven spirits of God" (3:1; 4:5; 5:6) may seem strange on first reading, for there aren't seven Holy Spirits. We need to recall that Revelation is apocalyptic, regularly using numbers with symbolic import. Thus the number seven here designates perfection and the fullness of the Holy Spirit. We almost certainly have an allusion to Isaiah 11:2, where seven things are said about the Spirit: "The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD." Here we have compelling evidence that the Spirit is divine, for, as noted above, grace and peace come only from God, and here grace and peace come from the Holy Spirit, who himself contains all divine perfections.

1:5 The grace wish, as noted in verse 4, comes from the Father and the Holy Spirit. Now we see it coming also from Jesus Christ. The focus is certainly on Jesus, as more is said about him (cf. vv. 5–6) than about the Father or Spirit. We note first that grace and peace come from "Jesus Christ," but we know that grace and peace come from God, and hence we have clear evidence that Jesus Christ is fully divine.

¹³ See the commentary on the respective texts where the phrase is used.

Here we have the raw materials from which the doctrine of the Trinity was derived. The Trinity wasn't invented by the church in later ages but was formulated through a careful and intense exegesis of the relevant NT texts. The church's deliberations and conclusions, as expressed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds, represent theological exegesis at its best. We don't have a capitulation to Greek philosophy—quite the contrary. The doctrine of the Trinity goes against the philosophical notions reigning at the time, stemming instead from what is revealed in the NT.

Jesus Christ is fully God, but he is also fully human. His human name is Jesus—the man from Nazareth, the son of Mary who suffered and died for the salvation of his people. Jesus is also the “Christ.” John doesn't use the title *Christ* as Jesus' last name but, as a Jew nurtured in the messianic hope, he gives the title its full significance (cf. 1:1, 2; 11:15; 12:10; 20:4, 6). Jesus is the son of David (5:5; 22:16), the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant promising an everlasting Davidic dynasty (2 Samuel 7; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalms 89; 132).

Jesus Christ is the “faithful witness” (cf. Rev. 3:14; Ps. 89:37; Isa. 55:4). The word “witness” (*martyrs*) in the course of church history developed to mean one who testified to Jesus Christ by giving his or her life in death. At this juncture, however, even though Jesus sacrificed his own life, the term doesn't have that technical sense. Jesus was a faithful witness not only in death but during his entire life as well. Jesus here functions as an example for the readers, called to be faithful witnesses like their Lord. The course the readers are called to run was traversed first by Christ.

Jesus is also the “firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.” Paul also claims that Jesus was the “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). “Firstborn” in Hebrew culture designated privilege and rule, as formalized in the practice of primogeniture. In most instances where Jesus is identified as “firstborn,” his sovereignty and rule are featured (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15, 18; Heb. 1:6), just as the king in the Davidic line is identified as “firstborn” (Ps. 89:27). Possibly there is also the notion of time in Revelation, with John intending us to understand Jesus as the first person resurrected in history. Others were resuscitated (like Lazarus), but they all died again. Jesus, on the other hand, has conquered death forever. At the same time, he is sovereign over death, having triumphed over it. Death no longer rules—Christ rules. Indeed, he rules over the “kings on earth.” Those addressed in Revelation were suffering. Some were being put to death, a threat present for all believers. No one knew what might come next. It would be easy to think they were at the mercy of Rome and its emperor. Without denying the moral responsibility of rulers, the readers are reminded that Jesus rules over rulers. Hence the Christians in the churches must not fear the imperial power of Rome or any governing authorities. Even if they give their lives in death like Jesus, death will not triumph over them. They will share in Jesus' victory over death and are to trust in his sovereignty over all opponents.

The remainder of verses 5–6 consists of a doxology to Jesus Christ for his redeeming and saving work. John begins by reflecting on the love of Jesus Christ manifested in his giving himself for the redemption of human beings. The read-

ers can rest secure despite the storms swirling around them, for the one sovereign over death and kings loves them with a costly love. They may be hated by Roman authority and the culture they inhabit, but Jesus Christ loves them with a love that delivers them from their greatest enemy. Christ's love expresses itself in the giving of his life for their sake, by which believers are released from their sins. Some manuscripts say believers were "washed" (*lousanti*) instead of "freed" (*lysanti*) from their sins. The former idea is quite attractive and fits with Revelation 7:14 and 22:14, where a different verb for washing is used. Still, we can be almost certain that John wrote "freed" instead of "washed." The reading "washed" is supported by the Textus Receptus, while "freed" is supported by early and superior manuscripts (p¹⁸, Ⳑ, A, C). Furthermore, there is likely an allusion to Isaiah 40:2, which speaks of Israel's sin being "pardoned" (*lelytai*)—the verb translated "pardoned" in the Greek OT is the same one (*lyō*) in Revelation 1:5. The price of release is also specified in the preposition "by" (*en*), a preposition designating price in Greek. The price, of course, was Jesus' blood. The reference to his blood picks up on sacrificial language from the OT, where blood was offered to procure atonement (cf. Lev. 17:11). Jesus' blood, then, was the means by which believers were ransomed and purchased and liberated from the sin enchaining them (cf. Eph. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 John 1:7). The sacrificial character of the language used indicates believers need to be forgiven to be set free from the bondage of sin (cf. Ps. 130:8).

1:6 Jesus freed his people from sin for a purpose. His people constitute a kingdom and are priests of God the Father. When God created Adam and Eve, he placed them in the garden to rule the world for him (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). They were to be his vice-regents in the world, mediating his blessing as priests to the entire world. They were to mediate such blessing, however, in entire dependence upon God, so that he would receive glory and honor and praise as they carried out their mandate. They failed in their commission, of course, and brought into the world death and devastation and ruin (Rom. 5:12–19). Israel was also summoned to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6), but like Adam they transgressed the Lord's commands and did not bring the universal blessing promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 18:18). Instead, Israel was exiled from the land of promise because of sin. Not only did Israel fail to bring salvation to the world; they couldn't even find blessing in their own land because of their sin. Israel's history demonstrated they were still in Adam.

The promise of salvation given to Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:15) and to Israel has now been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. God's Spirit anointed him to proclaim good news, liberate those who are captive, and announce the year of the Lord's favor (Isa. 61:1–2; cf. Luke 4:18–19). The exile will end and Israel will be restored and rebuilt (Isa. 61:3–4). God's people will be his "priests" (Isa. 61:6), conveying his blessing to the world. According to John, this prophecy is fulfilled in Jesus' redemption, by which he has freed his people (both Jews and Gentiles) from sin so they can fulfill the mandate given originally to Adam and Eve. The church of Jesus Christ is where God now rules. His rule over the entire world is not yet evident, but he does reign

over his people. They are his realm, his kingdom, his dominion, and hence the rule of the saints is inaugurated but not consummated. And they are even now his priests (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5), enjoying access to God and proclaiming the good news of the king's reign and his offer of amnesty to all who repent and trust in him.

We see the same theme elsewhere in Revelation. Jesus redeemed people from every tribe, tongue, and people group to make them a “kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9–10). The rule first promised to Adam and Eve will become a reality in all its fullness. Even now believers represent the place where God rules, but the day is coming when they will reign over the entire world for his sake.

The redeeming work of Christ and the centrality of Christ in God's purposes do not diminish the glory of God the Father. Quite the contrary. These realities maximize God's glory. God is magnified, God is glorified, in his Son, Jesus Christ, especially in his saving work by which he redeems his people. Nor do the rule and priesthood of human beings, of the redeemed, somehow eclipse God. No, his glory shines even brighter through those he has reclaimed. His kingly power and sovereignty are displayed for all to see through the church, and thus God is to be praised forever; his kingdom will not fail. John adds the word “Amen,” meaning “May it be so”—the desire of everyone who is a member of the kingdom.

1:7 What is the relationship between this verse and the preceding ones? Verses 5–6 conclude with a promise of the coming kingdom, and now John tells us the kingdom will come in its fullness when the king comes, and he is coming with the clouds, as Daniel predicted. Everyone on earth will see him, and those who didn't repent will mourn, for they will recognize the Lord they spurned.

John begins with the word “Behold,” summoning the readers to attention. History as it is now won't last forever. A new day is coming, a new world is coming, and all must be prepared for that day. Jesus is coming again to the earth, on the clouds. John draws on Daniel 7 here, and in the context of Daniel 7:13–14 the “one like a son of man” comes not to the earth but to the Ancient of Days to receive the kingdom. God grants the kingdom to the Son of Man so that all will worship him and that his kingdom purposes for the world will be fulfilled.

The Gospels also identify the Son of Man as Jesus Christ, and obviously John shares the same view in Revelation, for in the subsequent passage John has a vision of Jesus Christ as the glorious Son of Man (Rev. 1:12–20). In Revelation John often applies OT prophecies in a new way, and he clearly does so here, for Jesus comes not to God in the clouds but to the earth. We know that coming to earth is in view, since “every eye will see him” and “all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” at his coming. John has put together Daniel 7:13 with Zechariah 12:10, and the latter text clarifies that the coming here is to earth. Such a combination of Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10, however, did not originate in the book of Revelation. We see this phenomenon already in the teaching of Jesus: “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the

tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30). Allusions to both Zechariah 12:10 and Daniel 7:13 are quite clear in the Matthean text. Whatever we make of the literary or oral relationship between this saying and Revelation, it seems clear that the tradition of Jesus coming with the clouds and people of earth mourning was being disseminated in the early church. In particular, the notion that Jesus would return to earth on the clouds was quite pervasive (Matt. 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27; Acts 1:9–11; 1 Thess. 4:17). The coming of Jesus, as we saw in 1:3, is one of the central themes of the book, and John again forecasts its importance. It hardly makes sense to limit this coming to Jesus’ “coming” to destroy Jerusalem in AD 70, for John refers not to the tribes of Israel (cf. Rev. 7:4–8) but to “all tribes of the earth,” and thus isn’t focusing on Israel’s judgment. Indeed, it is scarcely the case that every eye saw him in AD 70, nor did all the tribes of the earth mourn when Jerusalem was judged. Many in the Greco-Roman world might have rejoiced upon hearing of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. John writes, then, about a coming of Jesus that will be universal and evident to everyone on earth.

The notion that every person will see Jesus coming reflects the synoptic tradition (Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 21:27). At the same time, John picks up the words of Zechariah in saying David’s house and residents of Jerusalem will gaze on the one they pierced and mourn over him (Zech. 12:10). Zechariah focuses on cleansing and forgiveness granted to those in Israel as they weep over the one they have slain (Zech. 12:10; 13:1). John applies and interprets the OT text for his situation in a twofold way. First, “all the tribes of the earth” probably alludes to Genesis 12:3 (cf. Gen. 28:14; Ps. 72:17) and the promise to Abraham that many will become part of his family. In line with the original context of Zechariah, some who see Jesus will mourn and repent, which fits with Romans 11:26, where Paul says “all Israel will be saved” when the deliverer (Jesus) comes from Zion. Second, others seeing the pierced one will experience God’s judgment. John’s Gospel recounts the piercing of Jesus, constituting the fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy in history (John 19:34, 37). The Israelites who put Jesus to death looked on the one they pierced. In Revelation, however, the eschatological fulfillment of Zechariah’s words is contemplated, indicating that fulfillment of prophecy may occur at more than one level. Another way to put this is to say that Zechariah’s prophecy relates not only to those who were historically responsible for Jesus’ crucifixion and piercing. John declares that “all the tribes of the earth”—all who have rejected Jesus Christ as Lord—have pierced Jesus. Or we could say that every human being has crucified and pierced Jesus, but those who have repented of doing so are freed from their sins (Rev. 1:5–6). Those who refuse to repent will be filled with grief and sorrow (cf. Matt. 24:30; Rev. 18:9), for they will realize the hour of judgment has come. They will lament never turning to Jesus for salvation.

John responds to what he has written in verse 7 with an affirmation: “Even so” and “Amen.” The salvation of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked

are both a matter of joy in Revelation, the latter not because of vindictiveness but as a matter of justice. The coming of Jesus means the coming of the kingdom, the removal of everything defiling and evil upon the earth, and the inauguration of a new creation, perfect and beautiful. The natural response, the only healthy response, to such a new creation is yes and amen. This is John's way of affirming the petitions of the Lord's prayer. Yes and amen to the kingdom coming, yes and amen to God's will being done on the entire earth.

1:8 The prologue concludes with an emphatic statement of God's sovereignty. God declares himself to be "the Alpha and the Omega," referring to the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. At the outset and conclusion of the book, God claims this title (cf. 21:6). He reigns over all history from beginning to end, and if he rules over the beginning and the end, he rules over everything in between as well. The church, suffering under the thumb of the Roman Empire, could not say that God had abandoned them or that his rule had been compromised. He rules over every particle and speck of history, and has and always will be eternally God.

John then reiterates the words said of God in 1:4: the one who is, who was, and who is to come.¹⁴ He is mighty God in every moment faced by those who belong to him. There was never a time he was not supreme Lord over all, and there is no chance that history will spin out of his control. He is coming through his Son, Jesus Christ, to bring in the kingdom.

Believers can be guaranteed such vindication because God is "the Almighty." "Almighty" (*pantokratōr*) in the LXX is most often a translation of the Hebrew for "LORD of hosts," referring to Yahweh as the Lord of the armies of heaven. Yahweh rules, according to the OT witness, in heaven and on earth. The book of Job often uses the term "Almighty" as a translation of *shadday* (Job 11:7; 22:17, 25; 23:16; 27:2; 34:12; 35:13). Typically, *shadday* is understood by OT scholars to refer to God's power and might, and hence the LXX translation is fitting. The background in Job is significant, as God is designated the Almighty One in the midst of Job's intense suffering. John explains here why God rules over history. He is Almighty God who always fulfills his purposes and plans, and thus nothing or no one can thwart his designs.

Response

Three themes should be highlighted here. First, the sovereignty of God; second, the centrality of Jesus Christ; and third, the grace and peace intended for believers. God's sovereignty breathes through these verses so that the readers are assured, amid their suffering, that they are in his loving hands. He never abandons his people but will accomplish his purposes despite the horrendous evil characterizing their present existence. The sovereignty of God assures believers that his kingdom will come and his will be done. The tears and sighing of this present evil age won't last forever, nor will the wicked endure. What confidence and trust

¹⁴ Cf. comment on 1:4 for a fuller discussion.

believers should have when they rest in the goodness and strength of the one who reigns over history, the one who is Almighty God, Alpha and the Omega, who is and was and is to come!

Second, we see the centrality of Jesus Christ. The book is a revelation of Jesus Christ. He is the example par excellence for Christians of one who suffered as a faithful witness. God's sovereignty over the world is expressed in Jesus, for he has conquered death and rules over every king, emperor, prime minister, and president. He will come soon and establish his kingdom. Is his coming good news? It is for believers, as Jesus Christ is also their Redeemer. Believers can be confident they will enjoy the new creation and won't be expelled from the city to come. John reminds Christians they are loved by Jesus Christ, as was manifested in the shedding of his blood. Jesus gave his life to free us from our sins. Because of the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the evil we have done no longer stains or defiles us. And John doesn't stop there. We have been freed for a purpose. The role intended for Adam and Eve belongs to us through Jesus Christ. We are kings and priests through Jesus Christ, and thus God's kingdom, even if invisible to the world, is present now in the church of Jesus Christ.

Third, by virtue of the sovereignty of God and the work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we may now enjoy grace and peace. We experience the grace of God when we know the love he has for us in Jesus Christ. Since he has freed us from our sins, he won't withhold any gift from us. He is in control of our lives and all of history. He knows what we can handle and gives us strength to face all that comes our way. As a result we enjoy his peace, knowing that all things will end well and that God is always for us in Jesus Christ.

REVELATION 1:9–20

⁹I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came

a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. ¹⁹ Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

Section Overview

John introduced the book in the prologue, and in verses 9–20 he informs his readers of the circumstances leading him to write. The text can be structured into four sections. First, in verses 9–11 John tells readers he is writing from Patmos, where he has been banished because of his commitment to the gospel. He received a commission through a loud voice to write a book and send it to seven churches in the province of Asia. Second, John turns to see the voice of the one speaking to him and receives an astounding and glorious vision of the Son of Man (vv. 12–16). Third, in response to seeing such glory, John faints. But then Jesus, who has conquered Death and Hades, tells John not to fear (vv. 17–18). Fourth, John is summoned to write what God showed him in the visions and is given an explanation of the seven stars and seven lampstands (vv. 19–20).

Parallels between Daniel 10 (and Daniel 7) and Revelation 1 are quite striking, as table 9.5, compiled by James Hamilton, shows.¹⁵ Daniel 10 describes an angel, while in Revelation 1 Jesus is envisioned as the Son of Man.

TABLE 9.5: The Descriptions of the Ones Revealed in Daniel 10 and Revelation 1

Daniel 10	Revelation 1
10:5, “clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold”	1:13, “clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest”
7:9, “the hair of his head like pure wool”	1:14a, “the hairs of his head were white, like white wool”
10:6c, “his eyes like flaming torches”	1:14b, “His eyes were like a flame of fire” (description found also in 2:18)
10:6d, “his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze”	1:15a, “his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace” (description found also in 2:18)
10:6e, “and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude”	1:15b, “and his voice was like the roar of many waters”
10:6b, “his face like the appearance of lightning”	1:16c, “and his face was like the sun shining in full strength”

¹⁵ James M. Hamilton Jr., *Revelation: The Spirit Speaks to the Churches*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 49 (table 3.3).

What is the significance of these parallels? Since Daniel 10 describes an angel and Revelation 1 the Son of Man, it is evident that the descriptions here in and of themselves don't indicate these figures are divine, since angels aren't divine beings. However, we must also attend to differences between the two accounts, for Jesus is described, in contrast to the angel, in priestly terms (cf. comment on Rev. 1:13). Furthermore, as seen in the chart, John also draws on Daniel 7, and his use of Daniel 7 hints at Jesus' deity. Hence, both the angel of Daniel 10 and the Son of Man of Revelation 1 are glorious, but Jesus' glory surpasses the glory of the angel, for he is divine.

Section Outline

- I. Introduction (1:1–20) . . .
- B. Vision of the Son of Man (1:9–20)

Comment

1:9 John now explains the circumstances leading to his writing to the churches. In introducing himself, John doesn't focus on his apostolic authority. Instead, he emphasizes his solidarity with his readers. He is their "brother," i.e., a fellow believer. He is a part of the family of God, just as they are. He also emphasizes his partnership with them. He shares with them the "tribulation" and suffering believers face: slander, poverty, imprisonment, discrimination, social ostracism, physical abuse, and—in some cases—death. In John's case, he was banished to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea.

Presumably, the Romans exiled John to Patmos because of his proclamation of the gospel, described as the "word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (cf. 1:3). John's experience presages other texts in Revelation referring to the suffering of believers. For instance, the Philadelphian church is commended for holding fast to God's word in a culture opposed to its message (3:8, 10). The martyrs under the altar were put to death on account of God's word (6:9), and those who were beheaded were deprived of their lives "for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God" (20:4). Believers are said to conquer Satan by the "word of their testimony" (12:11). The word of God centers on the testimony about Jesus Christ (cf. comment on 1:2). Both John and his readers suffered because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ, their unflinching allegiance to the word of God.

John doesn't participate only in suffering; he and all believers share also in the kingdom. Even now he and they are members of the kingdom (1:6; 5:10; 12:10) and will reign with Jesus when he establishes his kingdom in all its fullness (5:10; 11:15). Hence, John's participation with them in endurance isn't pointless. Believers are members of the kingdom now, but they are called to endure so they will enjoy the kingdom in its fullness later. John forecasts the central admonition of the book in this verse. Believers are called to endure until the end to receive the coming kingdom (13:10; 14:12). John isn't engaging in theoretical reflection far from the suffering of his readers. He knows firsthand what it is like to suffer for

the sake of the gospel. The affliction, kingdom, and endurance are all theirs “in Jesus,” because they are united with Jesus as those who have been freed from their sins and made kings and priests (1:5–6).

1:10 John informs the readers that he was “in the Spirit.” We should not interpret this phrase in Pauline categories, as if John were telling us he was living by the power of the Spirit on that occasion (though doubtlessly he was relying on the Spirit) rather than in the flesh. The phrase “in the Spirit” is used at key points in the book to designate the spirit of prophecy (4:2; 17:3; 21:10). When John says he was “in the Spirit,” he indicates that the Spirit that animated OT prophets was on him as well (cf. Simeon in Luke 2:27). So, being in the Spirit means John was to receive revelation from God. This is further evidence (cf. Rev. 1:3), then, that the content of the book is authoritative, for John was inspired by the Spirit in what he wrote.

The day John received revelation was the “Lord’s day.” This is the only occurrence of this phrase in the NT. It refers almost certainly to Sunday, the day Jesus was raised from the dead. The Gospel writers all note that Jesus rose on the “first day of the week” (Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1, 19), and the notation suggests this particular day was significant for Christians. The observance of the Lord’s day makes sense, as Jesus’ resurrection was the inauguration of the new creation. We also learn from Acts that the church broke bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), most likely a reference to the Lord’s Supper. And Paul exhorts the Corinthians to set aside money “on the first day of every week” (1 Cor. 16:2). This evidence suggests Christians were starting to meet together on Sunday. John, exiled to Patmos, was deprived of assembling together with other Christians, and yet on this day the Lord spoke to him. The voice summoning John on that day was as loud as a trumpet blast, calling him to write down what God revealed to him. This trumpet echoes the trumpet sound when the Lord revealed himself to Israel on Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:17–20), here indicating the Lord was revealing himself to John. Just as God revealed his words to Moses on Sinai, so now he gives John his words on Patmos.

1:11 John is given his commission: he is to write on a scroll the message for the seven churches. Writing it down shows the authoritative nature of his message (Ex. 17:14; Deut. 17:18; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 36:2). The cities are listed in the order in which they are addressed in chapters 2–3: Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7); Smyrna (2:8–11); Pergamum (2:12–17); Thyatira (2:18–29); Sardis (3:1–6); Philadelphia (3:7–13); Laodicea (3:14–22). The order reflects the route a courier would take in delivering the contents of the book: Ephesus was on the coast, and the cities are in a circle, beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. We are reminded afresh that the book was written to specific churches in the first century.

1:12 John is riveted by the voice and turns to see who is speaking. The text says he “turned to see the voice”; voices, of course, cannot be observed by sight, but John refers to the person speaking with the voice (cf. LXX Ex. 20:18; Dan. 7:11). In

Judaism “the voice” often refers to God’s voice, though it could also be the voice of an angel here. On turning, John sees seven golden lampstands. We are told in Rev. 1:20 that the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The lampstand was in the Holy Place, just outside the Most Holy Place, in the temple (1 Kings 7:49; 2 Chron. 4:7, 20). The churches as lampstands are to reflect the light of the glory of God to the world (Matt. 5:14–16), and John calls them to be faithful witnesses.

1:13 When John looks, he sees a glorious vision of the Son of Man. The vision obviously isn’t literal but is stocked with imagery characteristic of apocalyptic literature. We could become preoccupied with each feature of the vision and miss the impact of the whole: the stunningly glorious appearance of the Son of Man. The many uses of the word “like” demonstrate that what is represented here shouldn’t be taken literally. This is confirmed by verse 16, for no one puts a two-edged sword in his mouth, unless he wants to be cut up rather badly!

The Son of Man is walking in the midst of the golden lampstands, indicating his dwelling with the churches. He is vitally present with the churches and knows their state, and has not abandoned them in their trials.

When John says he sees one “like a son of man,” he clearly alludes to Daniel 7:13, where the same phrase is used.¹⁶ In Daniel 7 the son of man is a glorious figure of a human being—the phrase “son of man” in Hebrew refers to humans (cf. Num. 23:19; Ps. 8:4; Ezek. 2:1, 3).¹⁷ At the same time, the son of man in Daniel has divine characteristics, for he comes with the clouds like Yahweh and all people serve him (cf. Ps. 104:3; Dan. 3:14, 17, 18). The “son of man,” then, is a human being, but he is more than a human being. Such a reading of Daniel 7 fits with Revelation, where the Son of Man is both human and divine. A reference to Jesus as the Son of Man isn’t common in Revelation (cf. Rev. 14:14), but it is pervasive in the Gospels. The Gospel of John particularly emphasizes that the Son of Man was lifted up and glorified through his death, so that his death becomes the pathway, the route, to Jesus’ exaltation (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:23, 34; 13:31). Even though the details differ, such a portrait fits with what we find in Revelation.

The “long robe” (*podērē*) represents the robe worn by priests (Ex. 25:7; 28:4, 31; 29:5; 35:9; Zech. 3:4; cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 18:24; *Sir.* 45:8). Similarly, the “golden sash” is almost certainly priestly as well (cf. Ex. 28:4, 39, 40; 29:9; 39:29; Lev. 8:7, 13; 16:4). In Daniel the son of man receives a kingdom along with the saints (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27), for he is their corporate head. The Son of Man, however, is not only a king but also a priest, suggesting, given Revelation 1:5–6, that he is the one who atoned for the sins of his people. The kingdom becomes a reality through the cross, and thus if there is no cross, if there is no priestly work of atonement, there is no kingdom for the saints.

1:14 If verse 13 teaches that the Son of Man is priestly, verse 14 shows he is all-knowing. The hair of the Son of Man is “white, like white wool, like snow.” In

¹⁶ The Greek is slightly different, but the meaning is the same.

¹⁷ Daniel 7:13 is written in Aramaic, but that doesn’t change the point made here.

other words, his hair is not just white but stunningly and brilliantly white. John once again alludes to the OT and tweaks it to make a point. In Daniel 7 the son of man approaches the Ancient of Days to receive the kingdom. The Ancient of Days who sits on the throne has “clothing . . . white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool” (Dan. 7:9). John hasn’t inadvertently attributed to the Son of Man what was true of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7. He hasn’t forgotten what Daniel says. Instead, John often applies OT texts in new ways, and the adjustment in this case is especially noteworthy, for John attributes to the Son of Man white hair, even though in Daniel 7 the white hair belongs to the Ancient of Days. The white hair, of course, isn’t literal but indicates the wisdom and omniscience of the Son of Man; thus there is no doubt the Son of Man is divine.

The eyes of the Son of Man are “like a flame of fire.” We should note the three uses of “like” (*hōs*) in this verse. We see the same word twice in verse 15 and once in verse 16, and we find a synonym also translated “like” (*homoion*) in verse 13. The apocalyptic and symbolic character is underscored by the use of “like.” John isn’t telling us that Jesus’ eyes *were* a flame of fire but that they were *like* a flame of fire. In Daniel 7:9 the throne of the Ancient of Days is like flaming fire, and flaming fire devours and destroys God’s enemies (Isa. 29:6). We see in Daniel 10:6 that a glorious angel also has eyes “like flaming torches.” Here it is the Son of Man’s eyes that are like a flaming fire, and the expression is used two other times in Revelation (2:18; 19:12). The parallel in 2:18 (cf. comment) helps us see that the expression denotes the penetrating discernment of the Son of Man. Nothing is hidden from his gaze. He knows exactly what is going on in the churches, in the empire, and in the hearts of all people. He knows those who are faithful to him, those who are straying from him, and those who have rejected him.

1:15 The feet of the Son of Man are “like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace.” This uncommon image is obviously not literal, as John again picks up the description of the angel in Daniel 10:6—“his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze.” In the ancient world, shoes or boots worn by soldiers were immensely important. If soldiers had ill-fitting shoes, their feet would be bloody and blistered in battle and hinder their ability to fight. Jesus’ bronze feet, on the other hand, are able to crush his enemies since they are made of bronze, and this perhaps also designates his moral perfection (cf. Rev. 2:18). No one is able to stand against him or conquer him.

The glory of the Son of Man continues to be developed in John’s vision. His feet are able to stomp on his enemies, and his voice resonates with power and resounds like “many waters” (cf. 14:2; 19:6; Ezek. 43:2; Dan. 10:6). We read in Psalm 29:3, “The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters.” God’s thundering voice communicates his power, majesty, and sovereignty. We see the same theme in Psalm 93:4: “Mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the LORD on high is mighty!” The thundering roar of the sea proclaims the power of God. However, roaring waters

are not limited to divine persons. In Ezekiel 1:24 the wings of the cherubim have a sound “like the sound of many waters, like the sound of the Almighty.” Still, even this verse assists us in understanding the meaning of the expression in Revelation. What is striking about the cherubim is the incredible loudness of their moving wings, like the sound of cascading water. But Ezekiel goes further, saying it is “like the sound of the Almighty.” This last statement is very significant, for we see the deafening waters reminding us of Almighty God. Hence, the voice of Jesus is like the voice of God — majestic, powerful, and effective.

1:16 Three things are said of the Son of Man in verse 16. First, he holds the seven stars in his right hand. Second, a two-edged sword is in his mouth, and third, his face shines like the sun. Holding the seven stars in his right hand is quite mysterious, for we don’t know what the seven stars are at this point in the narrative, but in verse 20 we are told that the “seven stars are the angels of the seven churches.” Unfortunately, this doesn’t help us a great deal, for the identity of the angels is itself contested. As will be explained in the comment on 1:20, the best guess is that the angels are literal angels who either superintend the churches or represent the spirits of the churches, perhaps representing their heavenly existence. In either case, Jesus holds them in his hand, controlling and protecting them (cf. Pss. 73:23; 139:10).

Jesus also has a sharp double-edged sword in his mouth. The sword refers to his words, for Revelation 2:12 speaks of the “words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.” Revelation 19:15 confirms the same notion, for when Jesus returns he judges and defeats the nations with a “sharp sword” coming from his mouth. In Isaiah 49:2 the servant of the Lord, who may be Isaiah, in the historical context of that book, has a “mouth like a sharp sword.” This reference is to the prophetic word of Isaiah, but the servant of the Lord is ultimately Jesus himself, and as the servant of the Lord he speaks the Lord’s word (cf. Heb. 4:12). The Son of Man must not be trifled with, for his word penetrates and judges those who oppose him. We read in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 that the man of lawlessness will be destroyed by the breath of Jesus’ mouth.

Finally, Jesus’ face shines “like the sun.” This is another way of describing the glory of the Son of Man. For instance, at Jesus’ transfiguration also we read that his face shone with glory (Matt. 17:2). This doesn’t necessarily indicate divinity, for an angel’s face may also shine with a brilliance like the sun’s (Dan. 10:6; Rev. 10:1). The point is that Jesus is glorious. Indeed, there is a danger in trying to distinguish too sharply the various descriptions of the Son of Man in these verses, for the overall impression is the main point. John wants us to see and feel the glory and splendor and majesty of the Son of Man.

1:17 We see here John’s response to the vision of the Son of Man. It is quite clear the main point of the vision is his transcendent glory and majesty, for John, upon seeing the vision, faints at his feet like a man who dies of a sudden heart attack (cf. Dan. 8:18). Falling before God or angels has its antecedents in OT depictions of

people in the presence of awesome beings (cf. Josh. 5:14; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 8:17–18; 10:7–9). The glory of God in the Son of Man was more than John could take as a mere human being. Still, John is strengthened by this glorious Son of Man. He lays his strong right hand on John and comforts him by telling him not to fear. Clearly, John was deathly afraid, keenly aware of his sin and finiteness. He knew he was unworthy to stand in the presence of the one he beheld. In the remainder of verse 17 and in verse 18 the reasons John should not fear are explained. Jesus, as the Son of Man, declares, “I am the first and the last.” These words are picked up again in Revelation (cf. 2:8; 22:13). What is remarkable is that these words allude to what is said of Yahweh in Isaiah (Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), and Isaiah emphasizes that Yahweh’s being the first and last distinguishes him from idols. Yahweh is set apart from false gods because he is the everlasting one. John should not fear, for the same is true of the Son of Man. He shares the identity of the one true God. He reigns over all of history, for he always has been and always will be.

1:18 As the Son of Man, Jesus is the “living one.” In both the OT (e.g., Deut. 5:26; Josh. 3:10; 1 Sam. 17:26; 2 Kings 19:4; Pss. 42:2; 84:2; Dan. 6:20, 26) and the NT (Matt. 16:16; 26:63; Acts 14:15; 2 Cor. 3:3; 6:16; 1 Tim. 4:10; Rev. 7:2), the Lord is often identified as the “living God.” The divine identity of Jesus again stands out, and yet there is a complexity to the picture, for Jesus is also a human being. Indeed, as a human being he died. But even though he died, death was not the final word, for Jesus triumphed over death at his resurrection. Now he is deathless and will live forever as the Son of Man and Son of God, the God-man, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. Since the Son of Man reigns over history as the first and the last, and since he is the ever-living one who has conquered death forever, he holds the “keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). “Keys” indicates his authority over both Death and Hades (cf. Isa. 22:22; Matt. 16:19; Rev. 3:7). Death and Hades are regularly brought together in Revelation (6:8; 20:13, 14). Hades is similar to the Hebrew Sheol and in the NT regularly refers to the realm of the dead (Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31). Death and Hades together refer to the same entity: the realm of death. They are personified in Revelation, perhaps also denoting demonic powers. Probably both ideas are present here, for there is a close connection between Satan and death (cf. John 8:44; Heb. 2:14–15). Those who belong to Jesus don’t need to fear, for Death and Hades and all demonic powers are under the authority of Jesus. Death will not defeat them, for Jesus as the living one has defeated death.

1:19 The instruction to John circles back to the mandate of verse 11. He must write what he has seen in the vision from God. The vision includes the glorious Son of Man described in verses 12–16 but also includes the contents of the entire book.

Some have derived an outline of the book from 1:19, saying that the things “seen” refer to chapter 1, the things that “are” to chapters 2–3, and the things that will take place “after this” to chapters 4–22. Actually, it is not that simple. For instance, the vision of God ruling on his throne in chapter 4 certainly includes the past and present and cannot be relegated to the future. Nor is it convincing

to say that all the events in chapters 5–22 relate only to the future. As I will argue in due course, the seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5) and trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19) relate to both the past and the future. The eviction of Satan from heaven recounted in chapter 12 occurred at the cross, and the two beasts of chapter 13 represent the Roman Empire and false religion, and such realities cannot be limited to the future. Hence, what John says here does not delineate the structure of the book. Instead, the entire vision relates to both the present and the future: John saw both what is now and what is to come. His vision comprehends all of history, including the present and the future, which are integrally related to the past.

1:20 Through John, the Lord now explains some of the symbolism. The seven stars signify the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The disclosure here unravels a “mystery” (*mystērion*). In English, and especially in theological discourse, we often use mystery to denote something beyond our understanding, and such usage is perfectly acceptable. Words have a range of meanings and can be used in a variety of ways. A mystery may refer to something that is puzzling or hard to figure out. In the Scriptures, the word usually refers to something once hidden but now revealed—often with redemptive-historical significance. In this instance, however, the significance does not seem to be redemptive-historical.

Even though John tells us the seven stars Jesus holds represent the angels of the seven churches, it is unclear who these “angels” are. Some have argued they are the pastors of each church—that in each letter (“To the angel of the church in Ephesus” [2:1], etc.) the leader of the church is particularly addressed. This solution is attractive, for why would John write letters to the heavenly angels of each church? Still, the interpretation doesn’t convince, for “angel” is never used in the NT to designate leaders of churches, and Revelation uses the word “angel” (*angelos*) or angels seventy-five times but never unambiguously of humans. Another solution posits that “angels” designates the spirit or spiritual state of each church. This reading is possible, but it is hard to see where *angel* has this meaning elsewhere, and in Revelation “angel” or “angels” always refers to heavenly beings. It is best, then, to see a reference to heavenly angels. The most important argument for this is the usage of the word. John refers to “angels” or an “angel” seventy-five times in the book, and every other use refers to heavenly angels. It is thus most natural to see a reference to them here as well. This argument is further strengthened when we observe that “angel” or “angels” typically refers to heavenly angels in the OT. Indeed, in the apocalyptic book Zechariah, the singular “angel” is used twenty times, always referring to a heavenly being. We also see in Job 38:7 (LXX) that angels can be identified as stars. It is much more difficult to know why angels are addressed in each of the seven letters here in Revelation. Perhaps the best answer is that the angels represent the churches in heaven or play some role in guarding and watching the churches. We see something quite similar in 1 Corinthians 11:10 concerning the role of angels in guarding or observing the worship of believers.

The heavenly angels are the stars of the churches, and the seven lampstands represent the seven churches. The tabernacle and temple each had a lampstand to illumine the Holy Place. In Zechariah, the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Joshua are represented by two lampstands (Zech. 4:2, 11). The notion here is that the church is to be light, illumining the world with the good news about Jesus Christ.

Response

Our response to encountering Jesus as the Son of Man should be the same as John's. When we see the Son of Man in all his glory, we are filled with awe and fall down in worship before him. When suffering comes, we must remember above all the glory of Jesus as the Son of Man. He is our Priest who atones for our sin, our Prophet who speaks the word of God, our King who reigns over all. When we see Jesus, we behold him in all his beauty and glory. And if we truly see Jesus, we won't fear anything else, not even death, for we will realize that Jesus holds the keys of Death and Hades. Death won't triumph over us, because it didn't conquer Jesus. We can be full of confidence whatever the opposition, whatever the situation, for Jesus reigns over all and will protect his own.

REVELATION 2:1–7

2 “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

²“I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false. ³I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. ⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. ⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’”

Section Overview

Chapters 2–3 consist of seven letters to the seven churches. The state of the churches is mixed, though on the whole their spiritual vitality is declining. The letters share the elements detailed in table 9.6, and observing the elements and their variations assists us in interpreting each letter.

TABLE 9.6: Elements of the Seven Letters

Church addressed	Ephesus 2:1–7	Smyrna 2:8–11	Pergamum 2:12–17	Thyatira 2:18–29	Sardis 3:1–6	Philadelphia 3:7–13	Laodicea 3:14–22
Addressed to the angel of the church	2:1	2:8	2:12	2:18	3:1	3:7	3:14
Some aspect of vision of Christ in chapter 1 related to the church	2:1	2:8	2:12	2:18	3:1	3:7	3:14
Commendation/encouragement of the church	2:2–3, 6	2:9	2:13	2:19, 24–25		3:8–10	
Correction of the church	2:4		2:14–15	2:20–23	3:2		3:14–18
Call to repent and threat of judgment	2:5		2:16	2:21	3:3		3:19
Call to listen to the message of the Spirit	2:7	2:11	2:17	2:29	3:6	3:13	3:22
Promise to “conqueror” (i.e., overcomer)	2:7	2:11	2:17	2:26–28	3:5	3:11–12	3:21

We see from table 9.6 that each of the elements is found in the letter to the church in Ephesus. The church is commended for its perseverance and orthodoxy but is rebuked for losing its first love. Their failure to love isn’t trivial, for their lampstand will be removed unless they repent and are restored. On the other hand, the one who overcomes and triumphs will be rewarded with the tree of life and a place in paradise forever.

Section Outline

II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22)

A. Ephesus (2:1–7)

Comment

2:1 The letter is addressed to “the angel of the church in Ephesus.” Ephesus played an important role as a port city on the west coast of the province of Asia. The city was famous for its temple to Artemis (cf. Acts 19:29–40) and was also enthusiastic about the imperial cult, hosting a temple for Julius Caesar. A temple for the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) may have been built before John wrote Revelation. Two dimensions of the vision of Christ are related to his self-identification in Revelation 2:1. First, Jesus “holds the seven stars in his right hand,” and we were told in 1:20 that the seven stars were the angels of the seven churches. The angels, which perhaps guard and protect the churches or represent them in heaven, are in the hand of the Son of Man. Ultimately, the protection of each church is in

the hands of the glorious Son of Man. Second, Jesus as the Son of Man “walks among the seven golden lampstands.” The seven lampstands are identified as the seven churches (cf. comments on 1:12; 1:13; 1:20). The Ephesian church, like every church, is to reflect the light of God’s holiness and love to the world (Matt. 5:15–16). Jesus walks in their midst. He is not distant from the churches but walks among believers and hence knows what is happening in each church; he cares for the church and threatens judgment if it goes astray.

2:2 The church is commended for its perseverance and discernment (vv. 2–3). The Ephesian church stands out for its works, its toil, and endurance. These Ephesian Christians did not only agree verbally with the Christian faith; they applied it practically to their everyday lives. Their works demonstrated the reality and concreteness of their commitment. Indeed, their work was marked by “toil” (*kopon*), meaning that they toiled and slogged even when weary. They were characterized by perseverance and endurance, continuing to labor and work even in adverse circumstances.

The church is commended not only for its labor but also for its spiritual discernment. They didn’t suffer from naivete but refused to tolerate so-called Christians who participated in evil. They didn’t blithely accept those who called themselves apostles. “Apostles” is probably not used here in the technical sense of the twelve appointed by Jesus but refers instead to those who were sent out as missionaries, as emissaries, as ambassadors of the churches (cf. Rom. 16:7; Phil. 2:25). The Ephesian church carefully assessed those who claimed to be messengers of Christ, exposing those who were not truly his disciples (cf. Matt. 7:15–20; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1–6). It is sometimes said that the Ephesian church is commended for doctrinal orthodoxy, which is certainly true. They would not accept teaching contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it would be a mistake to limit their discernment to doctrinal orthodoxy. They were also perceptive enough to identify behavioral deficiencies of false apostles. In other words, it is likely these false apostles recommended living in a way contrary to the way of Christ. Neither their teaching nor their works was pleasing to God. This makes perfect sense, for doctrine and life, teaching and behavior, cannot ultimately be separated.

2:3 John underscores further the endurance and perseverance of the saints in Ephesus. Their endurance is truly remarkable, for, humanly speaking, they had every reason to grow tired and weary. Nor can it be said that their endurance is merely an example of human strength and fortitude. On the contrary, they have endured for the sake of Jesus’ name. The reference to Jesus’ name signifies his deity, focusing on his character and being. God is identified and recognized by his name, and thus invoking any other god is to profane and take God’s name in vain (cf. Ex. 20:7; Lev. 20:3; Deut. 6:13). If believers endure for Jesus’ name, they esteem him as divine and assign him the same stature as God himself.

2:4 All is not well, however, in the Ephesian church. Jesus presents a complaint and reproves the church for a significant failing. They are persevering and discerning, but they have forsaken their first love. We think of Matthew 24:12, where Jesus warns that the pressures of the evil age will cause the love of many to grow cold. Is John referring to a failure to love God, or a failure to love one another? The expression itself doesn't answer this question. Fortunately, the letter of 1 John, which I believe was written by the same author, does. John says in his letter, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20; cf. also Mark 12:29–31; 1 John 2:9–10). Abandoning one's first love means, then, that one has strayed from both love of God and love of fellow believers. The two are inseparable. The church at Ephesus was persistent and orthodox, but a hardness, a callousness had arisen in its ranks. They needed a renewed fervency, a renewed tenderness for the Lord and for one another. True orthodoxy is always warm, loving, and generous in spirit.

2:5 The problem in the Ephesian church is not trivial. Jesus threatens to come and remove their "lampstand" if they don't repent. Is this a coming in history, or his final coming? It is difficult to be sure. It seems that the threat of the church losing its lampstand could happen before the second coming, which suggests a coming in history. Removing the lampstand means the church will lose its status as a Christian church; the light of Christ will no longer shine, and the message of the gospel will no longer resound from a church that has lost its first love. It will harden into a parody of a Christian church, for a church without love is a church without the gospel—a church animated by the gospel is full of love, as the continued need for mercy and grace echoes throughout the church.

The church must, then, *remember* where they were previously. The earlier days of love and devotion to Christ need to be reclaimed. True remembrance will lead to *repentance*. And those who truly repent will "do the works you did at first." They were no longer doing these works in the sense that their works were now bereft of love. Works that please God aren't merely the right actions; they have a specific quality, colored and animated by love.

2:6 The Ephesian church is deficient in love, but the call to love must not be misconstrued. There are some things that true love hates, for evil must not be tolerated or excused. Jesus returns again to the discernment exercised by the Ephesian church. They are commended for hating the works of the Nicolaitans. We are not told here what the works of the Nicolaitans are, and the matter is frustratingly obscure. John mentions them again in the letter to Pergamum (in v. 15), and I will discuss them a bit more fully there. The Nicolaitans probably tolerated such things as sexual immorality and eating food offered to idols. Perhaps they did this in the name of love and acceptance. But rather than falling for such wrongful compromise, the Ephesian believers followed Christ's example ("... which I also hate") and hated what the Nicolaitans were doing. Hate is not incompatible

with love, if it is evil that is hated and rejected (cf. Ps. 139:21). In our apathy and boredom, we may hate nothing and confuse our apathy and tolerance with love, falling into the errors of relativism and pluralism. At the same time, the Ephesian church may have overreacted, so that their zeal for truth squelched love for God and for one another (Rev. 2:4).

2:7 The words to these churches are the words of Jesus, but Jesus speaks to them by the “Spirit,” i.e., the Holy Spirit. And the message isn’t limited to the Ephesian church; it is “to the churches,” plural (cf. 2:11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). There is a universality to the words here, applying to all the churches John addressed and indeed to all churches of all time. The Spirit calls upon every church to conquer and overcome. As we saw in table 9.6, above, the call to overcome is near the end of each letter to the seven churches. The call is momentous, for one must overcome in order to obtain eternal life. Only those who overcome will receive the life that never ends.

Those who overcome will eat of the tree of life in “paradise.” The tree of life, of course, was in the garden where God placed Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24), and *paradise* literally means “garden” (e.g., Gen. 2:8, 9, 10, 15, 16). The tree of life (Prov. 3:18; 11:30; Rev. 22:2, 14, 19; cf. 2 *Esd.* 2:12; 8:52; 4 *Macc.* 18:16; 3 *En.* 23:18) and paradise (Luke 23:43; cf. 2 *Esd.* 4:7; 6:2; 7:36, 123; 8:52) symbolize the eschatological reward promised to believers.¹⁸ It is not necessarily a literal garden or tree of life, for the new creation—the new Jerusalem—is described also as a city (Rev. 21:1–22:5). The tree of life and paradise signify eternal life and the joys granted to those who belong to God.

Response

Jesus Christ knows what is happening in the churches. He penetrates to the heart and knows if we have lost our first love for him and for fellow believers. Faithful Christians must be orthodox in their theology and not tolerate evil. Theological discernment is imperative for the health and growth of the church. At the same time, we are called to endure and labor hard as believers. We are not promised a soft life. Still, as we test and assess those who claim faith, we can lose the love that first animated us as believers. Our Christian lives can lose the fire and passion that enlivened us at the outset. As churches and as individuals, we need to keep our lamps burning with the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. If we have lost our first love, we must call to God and ask him to rekindle our love for him and others. Our orthodoxy must be leavened with love; otherwise we become stern and hard, forgetting the love that saved us from our own sins.

¹⁸ Some verses in Proverbs also point to the enjoyment of the tree of life during this present life.

REVELATION 2:8–11

⁸“And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹“‘I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander¹ of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.’”

¹Greek *blasphemy*

Section Overview

The church in Smyrna stands out, like the church of Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7–13), as one with which the Lord has no complaint. Instead, the living Christ encourages the church as it faces persecution, especially from the Jews in the local synagogue. The church must brace itself and be ready for further suffering, even unto death, but those who conquer and overcome will triumph over death forever.

Section Outline

- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22) . . .
 - B. Smyrna (2:8–11)

Comment

2:8 Smyrna, like Ephesus, was a harbor city. It was well known for its temple to the Mother Goddess. The imperial cult was present in John’s day as well, with a temple built for Emperor Tiberius (AD 14–37). The church faced opposition for its allegiance to Jesus Christ, from both the Jewish synagogue and the pagan culture. The words of Christ to the Smyrnans are surely relevant for a church alienated from its social world. Jesus reminds them that he is the “first and the last,” echoing 1:17. As we saw there (cf. comment on 1:17), only God is the first and the last, and thus the divinity of Jesus is heralded here. Jesus Christ rules and reigns over all of history: the beginning, the end, and all points in between. The church in Smyrna isn’t the victim of fate or hostile forces. Furthermore, they have nothing to fear, for they belong to the one who triumphed over death. Jesus was put to death through the instigation of Jews by the hands of Romans—the same threats menacing the

Smyrnan church (cf. 2:9). Nevertheless, Jesus conquered death as he rose from the grave. Since the Smyrnan Christians belong to Jesus, they will share his destiny and enjoy life forever.

2:9 Jesus encourages and challenges the church at Smyrna in verses 9–10. He knows and understands their situation. They face “tribulation,” i.e., pressure and trouble, because of their commitment to Jesus Christ. More specifically, they struggle with poverty. Those who don’t align with the beast are not permitted to buy and sell (13:17), while those who side with Babylon enjoy the dazzling riches and luxuries of this world (cf. 18:4, 7, 9, 11–16, 19). Yet, even though the Smyrnan believers are impoverished physically, they are spiritually rich. Their experience echoes David’s words: “You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound” (Ps. 4:7).

The church is also the object of condemnation and slander from the Jewish synagogue. Judaism was a legal religion under the Roman Empire, and the Christian movement for many years lived under the protection of the Jewish banner. Presumably, however, the Jews who belonged to the synagogue in Smyrna, which had a large Jewish community, were reporting the Smyrnan Christians to the local authorities, declaring that they weren’t members of the synagogue, weren’t truly Jews, and didn’t deserve legal protection. But such Jews were not really God’s people, says John. Instead they were a “synagogue of Satan” (cf. Rev. 3:9; John 8:44; Rom. 2:28–29; Gal. 6:15). John’s words are quite astonishing and may even sound hateful and anti-Semitic to our ears. But we need to recognize that John himself was Jewish and had no animus *per se* against Jews. Indeed, he would probably be shocked to learn that his words have been used down through the ages to persecute and mistreat Jews. When John wrote these words, the Jews in Smyrna had social and political power while the church was at the bottom of the cultural ladder. John didn’t write these words to incite hatred against the Jews. He wrote them to comfort the church. Believers of Christ in Smyrna might have been tempted to join the local synagogue to escape persecution. John warned them against such a move: it would have meant joining with those who renounced Jesus as the Christ, so they must resist that temptation at all costs.

2:10 The church in Smyrna is now issued a challenge. It is summoned not to fear what it is about to suffer (cf. Matt. 10:28). When John says “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison,” the reference to the “synagogue of Satan” in verse 9 should be recalled. Most likely, the Devil would bring about these imprisonments through the agency of the Jews who were slandering Christians as disloyal citizens (cf. comment on Rev. 2:9). Still, God reigns and rules even in such circumstances. The word “tested” means “tempt” from the Devil’s perspective but “test” from God’s. The Devil meant their imprisonment for evil, but God intended it for good, testing the believers in their suffering. Their trials were intended to make them stronger and more mature as believers (cf. Rom. 5:3–5; James 1:2–4; 1 Pet. 1:6–7).

However, the suffering inflicted by the Devil has a limit; it will last only “ten days.” The number isn’t literal, for apocalyptic literature regularly uses numbers symbolically. The point is that the suffering won’t last forever. This doesn’t necessarily mean the believers would be released from prison, for the next line says they must be prepared to die. The ten days, then, refers to a limited period of time. The suffering in this world is always for a “little while” (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6; 5:10) compared to the final everlasting reward.

Still, the challenge is sobering. The Smyrnans were called to be “faithful unto death.” Their devotion to Jesus means he rules over every part of their lives. If they are faithful, Jesus will give them the “crown of life,” an image of a garland wreath. James promises the same reward to those who endure testing (James 1:12; cf. 1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:4). The word “life” is appositional to crown; hence the crown *is* eternal life. The crown isn’t a reward above and beyond eternal life, as the next verse makes clear. The reward, the crown, is life itself. Just as Jesus triumphed over death and is the ever-living one (Rev. 1:18), so too the believers in Smyrna will never die if they are willing to give their lives for the sake of Jesus Christ.

2:11 The words to Smyrna are the words of the Holy Spirit, addressed to and applicable to all the churches: the one who “conquers,” the one who overcomes, will not be injured by the “second death.” John uses the phrase “second death” three other times (20:6, 14; 21:8) and identifies it as the lake of fire. It clearly refers to punishment in hell, and thus we have further evidence that the “crown of life” (2:10) refers to eternal life. The Ephesians are promised eternal life if they conquer; they will enjoy the tree of life in paradise (2:7). Now John communicates the same truth in another way: Those who conquer won’t suffer the second death. They will die physically, but they will be spared the second death—eternal death, separation from God forever (cf. 14:9–11).

Response

We are reminded in the letter to Smyrna that as Christians we are called to suffer. Persecution takes different forms, and we don’t all suffer death or imprisonment for our faith. Still, we don’t know what will come in our lives, and some believers throughout history have witnessed to their faith in Christ by giving their lives. Still, we have nothing to fear, for physical death is not the ultimate reality. Those who belong to Christ will be raised from the dead as Jesus was. Because we belong to the one who is “the first and the last,” we “will not be hurt by the second death.”

REVELATION 2:12–17

¹²“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

¹³“ ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith¹ even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. ¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality. ¹⁵So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. ¹⁶Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. ¹⁷He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.’”

¹Or *your faith in me*

Section Overview

The church at Pergamum has been faithful despite severe persecution, which may have come because of their refusal to participate in the imperial cult. Antipas has even given his life for the sake of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the church is compromising by eating food sacrificed to idols and participating in sexual immorality. They must repent of such actions to avoid judgment and gain entrance into life.

Section Outline

- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22) . . .
- C. Pergamum (2:12–17)

Comment

2:12 The church in Pergamum was under intense pressure, for the cult of the emperor was popular. Pergamum boasted temples for the goddess Roma and the divine Augustus. Asklepios (or Asclepius), god of healing, and Zeus also had temples dedicated to them. Most in the Greco-Roman world were syncretistic in their religion, not devoted to only one god; they worshiped and served many gods and enlisted the aid of any god who could help them. Christians stood apart because they refused to recognize any god apart from the one true God who had

revealed himself in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Jesus identifies himself here (cf. 1:16) as the one having a sharp double-edged sword. The sword represents Jesus' words, penetrating to the deepest level (Isa. 49:2; Heb. 4:12; cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 18:16). Jesus will judge and destroy by his word those who side with the emperor or any other idol. He will strike down the nations with his sharp sword (Rev. 19:15). The beast and false prophet will be judged and cast into the lake of fire by his word (19:20). Similarly, those in the church who compromise by giving their allegiance to the emperor or participating in pagan idol feasts or sexual sin will face the judging word of Jesus.

2:13 Jesus knows the circumstances believers encounter, being well aware of the situation in Pergamum. Pergamum is described as the place of Satan's throne, the place where Satan dwells. This is probably a reference to the imperial cult, for, as stated above, devotion to the emperor played a central role in Pergamum. It is possible, however, that devotion to other deities and cults is included here as well. The Christians in Pergamum are commended, for they have persevered in their devotion to Jesus' "name" and have not "denied the faith," even amid such great hostility.

The faithfulness of those in Pergamum is striking—they persevered even as Antipas sacrificed his life for Jesus' sake. Antipas is described as a "faithful witness," the same description given to Jesus Christ in the first chapter (1:5). The word "witness" (*martyrs*) didn't yet have the technical meaning "martyr," one who gives his or her life for the sake of the gospel. Still, in this case Antipas bore witness with his life, showing his devotion to Jesus presumably by refusing to compromise with the imperial cult.

2:14 The believers in Pergamum are commended for their continued devotion to Jesus Christ, but they are also indicted for compromising. Some in their midst advocated and accepted the "teaching of Balaam." John alludes to the biblical story of Balaam (Numbers 22–24). Balaam was prevented by the Spirit of God from cursing Israel (even though he wanted to) and was compelled to bless them, but he found another way to subvert Israel. He incited Israel to join with the Moabites in their sacrifices and sexual immorality (Num. 25:1–2, 6; 31:16). Twenty-four thousand were killed in Israel for their unfaithfulness (Num. 25:9). The history of Israel was replicating itself in Pergamum, for some in the church were participating in worship in pagan temples and indulging in sexual immorality. Some argue that the reference to sexual immorality here refers to idolatry, and such a reading fits with John's indictment of Babylon in Revelation 17:1–19:5. Still, there is no reason for an either-or here. It is quite likely that the idolatry of some people was combined with sexual sin. Perhaps they argued that such worship didn't violate their faith since the many gods in Pergamum were false gods (cf. 1 Cor. 8:4–6). In any case, they sought to fit in with the trade guilds and social context of the city by joining in such activities. And they didn't merely *do* what was wrong but also *propagated* their view by instructing others. Both their words and their actions

functioned as a “stumbling block” (*skandalon*). Stumbling here isn’t a mild misstep; it refers to losing one’s final reward by falling away from the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who follow false teachers will be judged by the words of Jesus (Rev. 2:12, 16) if they don’t repent. Those who compromise aren’t falling short in a trivial way; their future reward is called into question.

2:15 Some of the Christians in Pergamum followed Balaam’s teachings (v. 14); some also follow the teaching of the Nicolaitans. The Nicolaitans were mentioned also in the letter to Ephesus (v. 6). Unfortunately, we have frustratingly little information about the Nicolaitans. Some have drawn a connection to the proselyte Nicolaus, appointed to help the Hellenistic widows of the early church (Acts 6:5). If this connection is accurate, Nicolaus must have later departed from the faith he confessed. Perhaps the teaching was the same as the teaching of Balaam. If this is the case, then verse 15 simply restates verse 14, and “so” (*houtōs*) doesn’t designate a distinct group. Interestingly, “Balaam” in Hebrew and “Nicolaitans” in Greek both mean “conquer the people.”

2:16 Since some in the church have embraced the teaching of Balaam and pursued sexual sin and the temples of idols, the believers are called upon to repent. Failure to repent will have dire consequences, for Jesus is coming soon and will judge those who persist in sin. The “soon” coming of Jesus could refer to the second coming (cf. 1:1; 22:6, 7, 12, 20) or to a coming in history to judge the church. Deciding between these two options is difficult, for the imminence of the coming doesn’t necessarily mean (cf. 1:1; 1:3) that it will occur within a short span of time. Here, a judgment in history is more likely, for the judgment of the church is intended to purify the church prior to the final judgment. The sword in Jesus’ mouth (cf. 2:12), the mighty word he speaks, will be wielded against those who have given themselves over to evil.

2:17 The words of the risen Christ are also the words of the Spirit of God, containing an earnest message for all the churches. John concludes with a promise to the one who conquers. This is both a promise and a demand, for all must overcome and triumph to receive the reward. The language is highly symbolic and hard to pin down. Jesus will give “hidden manna” to those who conquer. Manna, described as bread from heaven (Ps. 78:24), was given as sustenance to Israel in the wilderness (Ex. 16:31, 33, 35). *Second Esdras* 1:19 calls it the “bread of angels.” In *2 Baruch* 29:8 we read, “It will happen at that time that the treasury of manna will come down again from on high, and they will eat of it in those years because these are they who have arrived at the consummation of time.” According to *2 Maccabees* 2:4–8 Jeremiah took the tent, the ark, and the altar of incense to Mount Sinai when Israel was sent into exile and said the place would be disclosed in the future, when God showed mercy to the people. Just as these items were hidden, so too the manna is hidden as the future reward for those who overcome. It seems, then, that manna here designates heavenly reward, the eschatological reward for the

faithful. The manna now hidden will be given them at the marriage supper of the Lamb (cf. Rev. 19:9).

The “white stone” is another way of describing the same reward. Those who triumphed in games were given white stones for entry into celebratory banquets. Such stones were used also in court cases to signify acquittal. Those who overcome will enjoy the messianic banquet and stand clean before God forever. They will also be given a “new name” inscribed upon the stone. The new name may indicate Jesus’ name, ensuring entrance into the heavenly city. In the ancient world, to know someone’s name meant power over that person. Significantly, “no one knows” the name of Jesus, the one who rides on a white horse to conquer evil (19:11–12). When Zion is vindicated by the Lord before the nations, she will be “called by a new name” (Isa. 62:2; cf. Isa. 65:15), meaning she will be righteous and saved (Isa. 62:1–2). So too, those who conquer will be vindicated, saved, and given a new identity. The manna, the white stone, and the new name are various ways of depicting the heavenly reward, the eternal life to be granted to believers.

Response

Like the church in Pergamum, we must not allow any authority other than Jesus to reign in our lives. True believers said no to Caesar and yes to Jesus Christ, and Antipas was likely put to death for confessing Christ instead of the emperor. We are called to exercise such boldness and courage. God is to be first in our affections and actions. Nothing must displace Jesus in our lives, whether it be family, health, wealth, comfort, work, or success. Some in the church in Pergamum were compromising in other ways. They participated in local society by attending pagan temples, eating food offered to idols, and committing sexual sin. They didn’t stand out from the world but rather compromised with it. As Christians we are tempted to identify with the world. It is difficult to be on the outside of things; we want to be in what C. S. Lewis called the “inner ring,” to be part of the powerful and influential. But we are to resist such temptations because we now belong to Jesus Christ, who is to be supreme in our affections. No idol should take the place of Jesus Christ in our lives.

REVELATION 2:18–29

¹⁸ “And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: ‘The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

¹⁹ “ ‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. ²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. ²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, ²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. ²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden. ²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come. ²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, ²⁷ and he will rule¹ them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. ²⁸ And I will give him the morning star. ²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’ ”

¹ Greek *shepherd*

Section Overview

The church of Thyatira is addressed by the Son of God, the one with eyes “like a flame of fire” and feet of “burnished bronze” (Rev. 2:18). The church is commended for its love, faith, endurance, and progress. Nevertheless, a complaint about the church is emphasized. They are tolerating a female prophet who is teaching the same error criticized in the previous letter, i.e., eating food sacrificed to idols and indulging in sexual sin. Because the woman and her followers have refused to repent, judgment will soon follow. And each will be judged according to his or her works. The members of the church who don’t subscribe to this errant teaching are exhorted to persevere until Jesus comes. Those who conquer will be rewarded, reigning with Jesus over the nations and receiving the “morning star” (v. 28).

Section Outline

- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22) . . .
 - D. Thyatira (2:18–29)

Comment

2:18 Thyatira, not a major city, was nevertheless known for its trade guilds, especially in the fields of metalworking and textiles. Believers were clearly tempted to compromise in order to belong to such guilds. We find here the only use of the phrase “Son of God” in Revelation. The church is addressed by the one who is uniquely related to God, the one who is Son of the Father. The Gospel of John especially emphasizes Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus’ majesty and the authority of his words are underscored by this title—perhaps in opposition to the so-called glory of the Roman emperor as the son of god; or in opposition to Apollo, the son of Zeus and a prominent deity in Thyatira. The description of the Son of Man from 1:14–15 is picked up here. He is one with eyes “like a flame of fire” and feet “like burnished bronze.” The description is similar to that of the angel in Daniel 10:6, whose eyes are “like flaming torches” and “arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze.” The flaming eyes of the Son of Man who is also the Son of God reflect the intensity of his vision and holiness. He won’t tolerate any evil—an especially fitting message for the compromisers in Thyatira. Not only does he refuse to compromise with evil, but he will crush and destroy those who oppose him. His bronze feet are of a metal far superior to any made in Thyatira (where military-grade brass was made), and no one can stand before the feet of him who tramples those who do evil (cf. comment on Rev. 19:13).

2:19 The commendation of the church is quite striking, for Jesus encourages them for many virtues and for their progress in the faith. They are saluted for their works—they are not a church sitting idly by, doing nothing. Their actions testify to the reality of their faith. They differ from the church at Ephesus in being commended for their love—their love for God and for fellow believers is alive and radiant, animating their work. They are faithful and engaged in service to one another. They are enduring and persevering in their life as Christians. And what is perhaps most remarkable of all is their growth as believers: they are making progress. Their works now exceed what they did as new believers. Even though their commendation is limited to one verse, the strengths of the Thyatiran church are notable.

2:20 Despite the many strengths of the church in Thyatira, Jesus as the Son of God has something against them as well, and it is no small complaint. This is a church known for its love, but love can lose its strength and moral center and morph into a toleration of evil, which is what was happening in Thyatira. Their love had turned to permissiveness, allowing a false prophet to exercise pernicious influence in their midst. The false prophet was a woman identified here as “Jezebel.” John picks up the name of Ahab’s wife, who played a central role in introducing Baal worship in Israel (1 Kings 16:31), just as he referenced Balaam earlier, in the letter to Pergamum (Rev. 2:14). This so-called prophetess, like the historical Jezebel, was subverting the people of God by introducing idolatry to the church at Thyatira. Her teaching was deceiving others, so that they engaged in sexual sin and ate food

offered to idols in pagan temples. It is possible that sexual sin actually stands for idolatry here, but the two are closely associated in any case, and thus it is likely their idolatry led to sexual sin, as Paul argues in Romans (Rom. 1:18–27). The same sins afflicted the church at Pergamum, as noted above (cf. Rev. 2:14). It was surely tempting to participate in activities in pagan temples, for trade guilds and other social activities centered on the pagan temples. The deceit of this “Jezebel” is connected to her spreading the “deep things of Satan” (2:24). Satan regularly deceives people into sinning (cf. Gen. 3:13; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:9; 20:3, 8, 10), and this false prophetess was his instrument in Thyatira.

2:21 The grace and love of God shines through here, for despite the egregious sins promoted by the false prophetess, she was given time to repent and turn from her evil. But like Jezebel of old, this woman was determined to pursue her own desires and refused to turn from her deviant teaching and lifestyle. Her stubbornness foreshadows the response of unbelievers to the judgments of God, for they also refuse to repent when summoned to do so (9:20–21; 16:9, 11).

2:22 Since the false prophetess refused to repent, judgment will follow. She loved the bed of idolatry and sexual immorality, and so will be confined to bed—most likely stricken with sickness (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). Those who joined with her in “adultery” will also suffer affliction and distress as a consequence of their sin. “Adultery” in this verse likely means spiritual adultery, though we also know from the previous verses that literal sexual sin was also being practiced in the Thyatiran church. Her teaching encouraged both idolatry and sexual sin. Revelation picks up the notion of spiritual harlotry, a common temptation of OT Israel (cf. Jer. 3:8–9; Ezek. 16:1–63; 23:1–49; Hos. 1:1–3:5). John in Revelation sees idolatry as spiritual adultery (cf. Rev. 14:8; 17:1, 2, 4, 5, 15, 16; 18:3, 9; 19:2). The last part of 2:22 indicates the judgments threatened were provisional for Jezebel’s followers. If they repented and turned from their sins and repudiated her teaching, the punishments could be averted.

2:23 Still, the threat (v. 22) was real and ominous, for if repentance didn’t follow, Jesus, the Son of God who sees all with flaming eyes and crushes all his opponents with his bronze feet (v. 18), will kill Jezebel’s “children”—her followers. The judgment will not be hidden: “all the churches” suggests the judgment against Thyatira would be known to all the other churches addressed in Revelation 2:1–3:22, showing again that the letters to individual churches were intended for all the churches. The churches would recognize by the judgment inflicted that no one deceives Jesus, for he knows the innermost thoughts and motives of everyone (cf. Jer. 17:10; Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5) and judges according to what a person does. Judgment according to works is a common motif in the NT (e.g., Matt. 7:21–27; 16:27; John 5:28–29; Rom. 2:6–11; 2 Cor. 5:10; 11:15; Rev. 18:6; 20:11–15; 22:12; cf. also Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12). Those who are punished receive what they deserve, for they are given opportunities to repent but refuse to do so.

2:24 Now the remaining believers in Thyatira are addressed, i.e., those who haven't followed the false prophetess's teaching and lifestyle—"the deep things of Satan." It is unlikely the prophetess or her disciples actually described her teachings in those exact words. She probably claimed to be teaching God's will and ways—perhaps even calling it the "deep things of God," but Jesus retorts that she is actually teaching the "deep things of Satan." In the same way, we are told twice that the synagogue of the Jews was a "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9). Certainly the Jews didn't say their synagogue was satanic, just as the prophetess didn't claim her teaching was from Satan. But Jesus knows her teaching is from the great deceiver (cf. 2:20). The only burden, the only requirement, Jesus gives to the church is to distance itself from such teaching. It is urgent that believers keep themselves from idols (1 John 5:21).

2:25 The church is to hold fast, to endure, until Jesus comes—i.e., his second coming. Those who persevere to the end, those who endure until Jesus returns, will be saved (cf. Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Col. 1:22–23; 2 Tim. 2:12). In many respects, this verse captures the message of Revelation as a whole: to receive the final reward, believers must continue to be faithful until Jesus returns.

2:26 Each letter to the seven churches concludes with a call to conquer and a promise to the one who conquers. Here conquering is expanded and unpacked in terms of keeping Christ's "works" until the end. What it means to conquer, then, is to persevere in faith and good works until the end. Those who overcome and triumph will be given authority over the nations, an image expanded in the next verse. In Daniel 7:14, dominion and authority are given to the Son of Man so that all peoples everywhere will serve him. The remainder of the vision in Daniel 7 reveals the Son of Man sharing his rule with the saints. The saints will possess the kingdom (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27) and rule with Jesus as the Son of Man. Believers who gave their lives for the Lord Jesus will sit on thrones and rule (Rev. 20:4). Paul says that saints will judge the world (1 Cor. 6:2). Jesus promises that those who follow him will rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; cf. Luke 22:20). This is not a special reward reserved for special Christians; all believers will enjoy this authority over the nations. All those who enjoy eternal life will rule with Jesus as the Son of Man. The original mandate to rule the world given to Adam and Eve will be realized by believers in the eschaton.

2:27 The theme of the rule of the saints continues with the wording of Psalm 2:8–9: the saints will rule with a "rod of iron," and those who rebel against them will be shattered like clay pots. It is quite surprising to see these words applied to believers, for in Psalm 2 they refer to the Davidic king who rules over the rebellious nations, and NT writers often see this psalm as fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The raging of nations and rulers (Ps. 2:1–2) finds its fulfillment in the crucifixion of Jesus by Pilate and the leaders of Israel (Acts 4:25–26). The notion of Jesus as God's Son alludes to this psalm (Ps. 2:7; cf. Matt. 3:17; 4:3; Luke 3:22), and Jesus' exaltation

to God's right hand at his ascension is also linked to the words of Psalm 2:7 (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5). Indeed, later in Revelation the rule over the nations is attributed to Jesus, and the words of Psalm 2:9 (that the nations will be ruled with an iron rod), here applied to the saints (Rev. 2:27), are said to find their fulfillment in Jesus (12:5; 19:15). Just as Jesus the Son of Man of Daniel 7 shares his rule and authority with the saints (Dan. 7:14, 18, 27), so too as the Son of David, the messianic King, he shares his rule and "authority" with those who belong to him (Rev. 2:27; cf. Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30).¹⁹ Jesus received his authority to reign from the Father, and believers receive their right to rule from Jesus. Rule here should not be identified with millennial rule, for the reward is comparable to the reward given to those who conquer in the other letters, i.e., rule in the new creation, the coming heavenly city. The rule described here manifests itself particularly in the judgment of the wicked, given the allusion to Psalm 2 and the reference to the shattering of the nations, but it isn't limited to their judgment. Believers will continue to rule in the new creation for all of eternity.

We have seen that those who overcome are promised paradise and the tree of life (Rev. 2:7), the crown of life and victory over the second death (2:10–11), and entrance into the final reward (2:17). The rule described here refers to yet another reward of the saints in the new heavens and the new earth—reigning eternally with Christ (cf. 11:15).

2:28 Believers will not only rule but will also be given the "morning star." What John means here is disputed. Does he refer to the promise that the saints will live forever and shine like stars (Dan. 12:3)? More likely, the morning star points to Venus, which shines even before the sun rises, and here it refers to Jesus himself, as Revelation 22:16 explicitly says. He is the star prophesied by Balaam in Numbers 24:17—the star who will crush all his enemies and rule forever. The greatest reward believers receive is Jesus himself, and they will reign with him.

2:29 The letter to Thyatira concludes with the words found in all seven letters; believers must pay heed to the words the Spirit is speaking to all "the churches" (cf. comment on 2:7).

Response

We learn from this letter that love can easily turn into a compromising tolerance, which is ultimately unloving. Rather than taking a stand for the truth, the church at Thyatira was permitting a false prophetess and her disciples to live in a way clearly contrary to the will of God. How easy it is for us to trim back what the Lord says about sexual morality and to think we are loving, generous, and kind in doing so. Genuine love always abides in the truth—there is both tenderness and toughness, grace and truth. Tolerance that contravenes biblical morality must not be confused with love.

¹⁹ The focus in Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30 is on the rule of the apostles.

God judges those who are unrighteous and pursue evil. And yet we also see the mercy of God, warning and instructing before executing judgment. He grants time and space for those engaged in evil to repent. Judgment is God’s “strange” work (Isa. 28:21). He doesn’t delight in the death of sinners but pleads with them to repent and live (Ezek. 18:23, 32). He stretches out his hands and invites people to come to him for forgiveness (Rom. 10:21), saying to all who are burdened that he will give them rest (Matt. 11:28–30). But those who despise God’s mercy and refuse to turn from evil will ultimately be judged. God waits, but not forever. Finally, justice must be executed.

We also get a glimpse of the future. Believers will reign with Jesus; we will rule the world with him. The rule initially granted to Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 1:28; 2:15) will be restored, but it will be more than restored. It will extend over the whole world, the entire universe. The greatest reward in the new creation is the morning star, Jesus himself. Still, there are indications that believers will have exciting responsibilities and tasks in the coming new world. The creativity and joy of planning and executing will be ours in a new and unimaginable way as we rule under our sovereign King, Jesus.

REVELATION 3:1–6

3 “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

“I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ²Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. ³Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. ⁴Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. ⁵The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. ⁶He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Section Overview

The city of Sardis believed it was invincible from attacks—its fortress was on cliffs thought to be unscalable, but twice in its history the cliffs *were* scaled and the city defeated. The church in Sardis was repeating the history of its city. The risen Jesus addresses the church as the one who has the Holy Spirit and the seven angels. Every church up to this point has received a commendation, but Sardis receives none. The

church may appear to be alive, but it is actually dead, or at least near death. They are summoned, therefore, to wake up and act. The matter is urgent. The church is summoned to remember and repent, for if they continue to degenerate, Jesus will come as a thief and judge them. The criticism of the church isn't universal, for there are some who are worthy and live in a way pleasing to God. Only those who overcome will receive white garments, have their names inscribed in the book of life, and be acknowledged before the Father and the angels. This is the message from the Spirit for *all* the churches.

Section Outline

II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22) . . .

E. Sardis (3:1–6)

Comment

3:1 The letter is addressed to “the angel of the church in Sardis,” just as each letter is addressed to the angel of the respective church (cf. Rev. 2:1). As in every letter, an element of the vision of Christ from chapter 1 is applied to the church. Here Jesus is described as the one who has the “seven spirits of God and the seven stars.” The “seven spirits of God” refers to the Holy Spirit (cf. comment on 1:4) and signifies his perfection. Why does Jesus emphasize here that he has the Spirit? It is because of the deadness of the church in Sardis. The church needed the power and fullness of the Spirit to become alive again, and Jesus can grant the Spirit to the church in Sardis. It is more difficult to discern the significance of Jesus’ possessing the seven stars, representing the angels of the churches. Perhaps Jesus is saying that he is sovereign over every aspect of the life of the churches, including their angels.

When Jesus addresses the state of the church and says he knows its works, we expect a commendation, given the pattern of the earlier letters (2:2, 19; cf. 2:9, 13). But here there is a sudden change: Jesus knows their works, and those works are completely inadequate. They had a reputation for spiritual life and vitality, but the reputation was undeserved. They were spiritually dead and needed a fresh infusion from the Holy Spirit.

3:2 The church at Sardis had become drowsy spiritually, so Jesus sounds the alarm and calls them to wake up. The call to wake up (*grēgoreō*) is used commonly to call believers to alertness (e.g., Mark 13:34, 35, 37; 14:38; Acts 20:31; 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Thess. 5:6, 10; 1 Pet. 5:8; Rev. 16:15). The church must not only awaken, but must also “strengthen what remains”—showing as hyperbolic the language in verse 1 of the church being dead. “Found” has a judicial sense, reflecting their standing before God. The church was declining and heading toward disaster, but some good remained (cf. also v. 4); the church was near death, but it was not dead yet. Hence, the good that remained needed to be stabilized and strengthened. Their works needed to be completed or “perfected” (NRSV) before God, becoming truly pleasing to him.

3:3 The Sardisian church must remember their initial acceptance of the gospel—what they received and heard at the beginning. They must heed that word and turn from evil and back to God. The directive is similar to the words given to the Ephesian church, which was also enjoined to remember and repent. If the church didn't awake from its spiritual slumber and revive its work, Jesus would come like a thief. Thieves, as the text says, don't come at an appointed time but rely on the element of surprise. Here we have a reminder of Sardis's history. The city believed it was impregnable because of its cliffs and walls, but twice the city was taken: by Cyrus II in 547/546 BC and by Antiochus III in 214 BC. The church now faced a similar danger because it was "nodding off" instead of remaining awake. The image of Jesus coming like a thief is common in the NT (Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:39; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 16:15). Jesus may be referring to the second coming, or to a less visible coming, one in which the lampstand of the church at Sardis would be removed, anticipating the final judgment.

3:4 The deterioration in the Sardisian church wasn't total, for there were still a few who were faithful. There was a remnant that hadn't defiled its garments. Sardis was famous for its wool production, making beautiful garments for consumers. Filthy garments picture, in a colorful way, the evil staining the lives of the wicked (cf. Zech. 3:3–4), and "white" garments describe the righteous (Rev. 3:18; cf. 6:11; 7:9, 13–14). The vindication of the righteous will be evident, for they will enjoy fellowship with Jesus in their white garments. They are "worthy" to walk with Jesus because of their godly lives. Certainly the righteousness of believers cannot be the foundation of one's relationship with God, since all are sinners and need to be liberated and cleansed from sin (cf. 1:5; 7:14). Yet those who are forgiven are called to live a new life, and their righteous works are evidence they are worthy to enjoy fellowship with Jesus forever.

3:5 The significance of "white garments" is clarified and tied to the call to "conquer." The summons to conquer is found in all seven letters and functions as a challenge and an invitation. Here those who overcome and conquer are promised white garments. As we saw in the previous verse, white garments are given to those who are righteous, who enjoy fellowship with Jesus Christ. This is another way of saying that the one who conquers will be granted eternal life. Such an interpretation fits the reward promised to those who conquer in each of the seven letters. It also accords with the next two descriptions of the reward. Those who conquer and have white garments will never be erased from the book of life. The "book of life" is used often in Revelation as the register of those who enjoy eternal life (13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; cf. also Phil. 4:3). Moses asked to be erased from God's book, for God to take his life in order to spare Israel (Ex. 32:32–33)—Moses had physical life in mind, but it is quite apparent that eternal life is in view in Revelation. Those who conquer and overcome evil will never be erased from life with God and Christ. Another way of stating the same truth is that Jesus Christ will confess before his Father and the angels the names of the faithful. Jesus will publicly vindicate the

overcomers and will say that they are his, giving them warrant to enter the holy city, the new Jerusalem. The saying here stands in contrast to the threat that those who deny Jesus will be denied by him before the Father (Matt. 10:33). Paul picks up on this same saying and declares, “If we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Tim. 2:12). Only the overcomers will receive a heavenly reward.

3:6 The letter closes with the same words we find in the other seven letters. The words of the risen Christ in the letter, the words of the one who has the Spirit of God (3:1), are the words of the Spirit also. They are directed not just to the church of Sardis but to all the churches, and must be heeded with urgency.

Response

The letter to Sardis is sobering, for a church may be convinced of its life and vitality and have a reputation for these things, yet be spiritually dead. There may be much activity in the church, yet the church may lack the works demonstrating it is truly alive. Believers continue to need the power and fullness of the Spirit to live in a way pleasing to God. A vibrant spiritual life isn’t autonomous; it is the result of the Spirit’s powerful work in us, transforming us. Believers must be vigilant to obtain the eternal reward. Indeed, the call to righteousness and holiness isn’t optional. We don’t have a meriting or earning of salvation here, but those who belong to God live in a way that pleases him. Their righteous works are evidence that they warrant an eternal reward. And such works are not a matter of indifference, for those who do not overcome, who spiritually slumber, will not walk with Jesus in the future. Their names will not be in the book of life; they will not be acknowledged by Jesus before the Father.

REVELATION 3:7–13

⁷“And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: ‘The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

⁸“‘I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie—behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. ¹⁰Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. ¹¹I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. ¹²The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the

temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.
¹³He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Section Overview

While the church of Sardis was given no commendation, the church of Philadelphia (like the church of Smyrna) receives no rebuke. The church was threatened, as were many cities in the province of Asia, by the imperial cult, and thus is addressed by the risen Son of Man who is holy and true, exercises the authority of the “key of David,” and opens and shuts according to his will. The church is commended for its works and has been given an “open door” because of its faithfulness. The synagogue of the Jews opposing the church is identified as Satan’s synagogue. They ultimately will recognize that the believers in Philadelphia are loved by the Messiah and will acknowledge such before all. Since the church has been faithful, they will be protected in the time of testing that is striking the entire world. Jesus calls the church to hold on in order to receive the reward, for he is coming soon. Those who conquer will be part of the new temple and the heavenly Jerusalem; they will enjoy eternal life in the heavenly city, in the renewed universe in which God dwells. John concludes by reminding his audience of the importance of hearing the message the Spirit has for all the churches.

Section Outline

- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22) . . .
- F. Philadelphia (3:7–13)

Comment

3:7 As with the other letters, the address is to “the angel of the church in Philadelphia.” As noted above, worship of the emperor was practiced there in the first century. The church is addressed by the glorious Son of Man, who is holy and true (cf. 19:11). The divine nature of *Jesus* is evident here, for in 6:10 *God* is addressed as “holy and true.” How do the holiness and truth of the Son relate to the church in Philadelphia? Jesus is the holy one of God (cf. Mark 1:24; John 6:69), i.e., the true Messiah. If we look at the rest of the letter, we see him vindicating his people and judging their Jewish opponents (Rev. 3:9). He will fulfill his promises to the church by preserving and strengthening them in their trials (3:10) and making them a part of his temple and the new Jerusalem (3:12). They are addressed by the one who holds the “key of David.” The key here represents the authority of David (cf. 1:18; Matt. 16:19), another way of saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ (Rev. 5:5; 22:16), the one who fulfills the promise that an heir of David would sit on the throne (cf. 2 Samuel 7; Pss. 89:28–29, 35–37; 132:10–11; Isa. 55:3; Jer. 30:9; 33:15, 17, 20–22; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hos. 3:5). The reference to Jesus’

messianic status is important here, for the Jewish Messiah belongs to Christians (both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus), not to the Jewish synagogue (Rev. 3:9) that rejects Jesus.

The authority of Jesus is underscored, for what he opens cannot be shut, and what he shuts cannot be opened. We have an antecedent in the words spoken about Eliakim in Isaiah: “I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open” (Isa. 22:22; cf. Job 12:14). The binding authority of Eliakim is featured in Isaiah, but Jesus’ authority surpasses that of Eliakim, since Jesus is David’s heir and the true Messiah. The Jews may have expelled Christians from the synagogue, but Jesus has given them access to his presence and has shut out unbelieving Jews, and no one can reverse his decision.

3:8 Jesus commends the church for its works, and, quite surprisingly, there is no corresponding rebuke. The words about open and shut doors (v. 7) are now applied to the Philadelphian church. Jesus has opened a door for them that no one can shut. It may be that the open door refers to an opportunity for mission and evangelism, since elsewhere the NT speaks of an open door with this meaning (Acts 14:27; 1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12; Col. 4:3). It seems more likely, however, that the reference here is to entry into God’s presence (cf. Rev. 4:1). In Isaiah 60:11 the gates of Jerusalem are open so that the wealth of the nations can enter, and John refers to these open gates and the entrance into the heavenly city later in Revelation (21:25–26). Such a reference fits the context of the letter to the Philadelphians. They have the open door to God’s presence and access to the heavenly city. The Jewish synagogue did not represent those favored by God; rather, the promises of end-time blessing were given to believers (both Jews and Gentiles) who put their trust in Jesus Christ.

The door was open because, although the church at Philadelphia had “little power” (i.e., they were a small church with little influence), yet they faithfully kept Jesus’ word and did not deny his name. We saw earlier (cf. comment on 3:5) that those who deny Jesus will be denied by him before the Father (Matt. 10:33; 2 Tim. 2:12), but the Philadelphian church, despite opposition from the emperor cult and the Jewish synagogue, continued to be faithful. They confessed Jesus’ name in the face of concerted opposition.

3:9 One source, perhaps the primary source, of opposition to the Philadelphian church is identified. Similar to the situation in Smyrna (cf. comment on 2:9), the Jews in Philadelphia had probably taken advantage of their privileged civic status and told the Roman authorities that Christians were not truly Jews, thereby exposing them to persecution from the state, presumably because of their refusal to participate in the imperial cult. Jews received a special exemption from Rome, but the same exemption was not given to Christianity, a new and strange movement. Jesus, however, did not forsake the church in Philadelphia, which was composed most likely of both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews who did not believe in

Jesus claimed to be the true gathering—i.e., the true synagogue—of God, but they were actually a “synagogue of Satan” because they rejected the one who had the key of David—the Davidic Messiah—and discriminated against Christians. True Jews are those who belong to Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 2:28–29; Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3).

Astonishingly, the Jewish synagogue had assumed the role the Gentiles played under the old covenant. In Psalm 86:9 the Lord predicts the Gentile nations would come and bow before Israel (cf. also Isa. 45:14; Zech. 8:20–23). The prophecy was fulfilled in a shocking way, for the church of Jesus Christ is now the true Israel. Jewish members of the synagogue will “bow down” before believers in Christ (Rev. 3:9; cf. Isa. 49:23; 60:14) and will acknowledge that Christians are “loved” by the Lord. The love of the Lord for Israel, communicated in texts such as Isaiah 43:4, is applied now to Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus (“I have loved you”; Rev. 3:9). Believers in Christ are the “offspring” who come from all over the world; they are ones “called by my name” (Isa. 43:5–7). Those whom the Lord loves, he elects to be his people, for God’s love manifests itself in election (cf. Deut. 7:7–8; 10:15; Isa. 41:8), and thus the church of Jesus Christ (not ethnic Jews who refuse to believe in Jesus) are the elect people of God. Some interpret the confession by the Jews (that Jesus loves the church) as predicting the conversion of Israel (Rom. 11:25–27), but the OT background points instead to their judgment. An eschatological reversal is coming. The Philadelphian believers are thereby encouraged and strengthened to persevere—they are the true people of God and will be vindicated on the last day.

3:10 The faithfulness of the Philadelphian church would be rewarded. They had kept the message (“the word”), which called for endurance. They had persevered and continued to confess Jesus amid opposition. As a result, Jesus promised to keep them from the time of testing that was coming upon the world. We find here the notion that things will become more difficult before the end comes. The messianic woes preceding the second coming of Christ will intensify as history draws to a close (cf. 2 Thess. 1:4–5). The judgments described here doubtlessly include some of what we see in the seals (Rev. 6:1–17; 8:1–5), trumpets (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and bowls (16:1–21) described in the remainder of the book. The testing is restricted to “those who dwell on the earth.” At first glance this phrase seems to refer to everyone on earth without exception, but the context indicates that the testing is particularly for unbelievers. This is confirmed by the use of the phrase “earth dwellers” (*hoi katoikountes*) elsewhere in Revelation; in every case the term refers to unbelievers (6:10; 8:13; 11:10 [2x]; 13:8, 12, 14 [2x]; 17:2, 8).

Interpreters who believe in a pretribulation rapture maintain that being kept from “the hour of trial” (3:10) means that believers will be raptured and taken away from the earth before that time of testing. Being kept from the hour of testing means, they affirm, that one is absent from the affliction striking the earth. It is more persuasive, however, to say that believers are preserved, guarded, and protected by God *amid* the testing. First, the message is for all the churches (3:13;

cf. 2:7 et al.), and it seems quite obvious that some Christians will be present on earth when the time of testing comes. Second, the phrase “keep from” (*tēreō ek*) does not have the sense of being “removed from the scene” but of being “preserved in the midst of the situation.” The parallel in John 17:15 makes this clear: “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.” Believers are preserved from committing apostasy as they continue to live in the world. Similarly, Lot and Noah, who lived many years in the midst of the wicked, were “rescued” (2 Pet. 2:9; cf. also 2 Tim. 4:18), their faith being preserved despite the oppressive situation in which they lived (2 Pet. 2:7–8). Third, when the plagues struck Egypt (Exodus 7–12), Israel was not preserved by being removed from the land. Instead, the Lord protected Israel as the plagues were inflicted upon the Egyptians, even though Israel continued to live in Egypt. Fourth, we probably have an allusion to Daniel 12:1, where the people who belong to the Lord will escape the time of tribulation, not by being removed from the world but by persevering in spite of suffering (Dan. 12:10).

3:11 Jesus declares that he is coming soon, a common theme in Revelation (cf. comments on 1:1; 2:16, 25; 22:7, 12, 20). The reference here is probably to the second coming, as it seems to end the suffering that believers must endure. Believers must always be ready for Jesus to return, showing their preparedness by enduring in the faith, by holding on to the faith they have confessed. Those who persevere will receive a crown, and the crown, as in Revelation 2:10, denotes eschatological reward: eternal life (cf. 1 Cor. 9:25; 2 Tim. 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4).

3:12 The promise and challenge to the conquerors, which is present in all seven letters, is given in this verse. Believers will be immovable pillars in the temple, will have God’s name written on them (cf. Ex. 28:36–38), and will bear the name of the new Jerusalem. The promises to the overcomers in the previous letters suggest the reward here is eternal life itself. John employs highly symbolic language to describe the final reward believers will enjoy if they conquer. If we connect what is said here to what we read earlier in the letter, the “open door” for believers (Rev. 3:8) is access to the heavenly temple and the new Jerusalem (v. 12). Induction into the temple and the heavenly Jerusalem are two ways of describing the same reality.

First, believers will be immovable pillars in the temple (cf. Gal. 2:9)—a striking promise for a city beset by earthquakes. John is simply saying that believers will be where God dwells, for as we shall see in the comments on Revelation 21–22, the whole universe will be his temple. In fact, there will be no temple in the new heaven and earth, as John forthrightly declares later in the book; God and the Lamb are the temple (21:22). The language of being a pillar in the temple means believers are secure; they will never be dislodged from the coming new creation. No enemy will ever be able to harm them or remove them from God’s presence. Members of the Jewish synagogue in Philadelphia believed the true temple was in Jerusalem, but Jesus reminds the church that the true temple is the coming new world, the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, the place where God and the Lamb dwell.

Second, Jesus will inscribe God's name on believers. We saw earlier that one's name signifies one's identity and nature (2:3, 13, 17). When the Lord reveals his name, he discloses his character (Ex. 33:19; 34:5–7). God's name in particular is to be consecrated as holy (Ex. 20:7; Matt. 6:9), since he is the Creator and is infinite in all his perfections (cf. Ps. 8:1). How amazing it is, then, that the name of God is inscribed upon believers. Christians belong to God and are secure in the care of the one who has put his name on them, for God is jealous above all else for the glory and honor of his name (cf. Deut. 6:13; Ps. 72:19; Ezek. 36:20–23).

Third, God will write on his people the name of the city of God, “the new Jerusalem.” They will be members of the heavenly city. The Jewish synagogue prized the earthly city of Jerusalem, but the earthly Jerusalem points above and forward to a better Jerusalem, a new Jerusalem, an eschatological Jerusalem, a heavenly Jerusalem. Describing it as heavenly means it is a transcendent reality; as John says, it “comes down . . . out of heaven.” John here anticipates Revelation 21:1–22:5, where the new creation is described as the “holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (21:2; cf. 21:10), and various features of the city are portrayed. It is abundantly clear, then, that the new Jerusalem is the eschatological reward for believers (cf. 2 *Bar.* 4:2). The notion of a heavenly Jerusalem is found also in Galatians 4:26, where Paul says that “the Jerusalem above is . . . our mother” (cf. Psalm 87; Isa. 66:7–11; 2 *Esd.* 10:7). Hebrews 12:22 also refers to the “heavenly Jerusalem” as the destiny of believers. Those who overcome will be citizens in the new Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the Jerusalem to come. The verse concludes by reverting to the name given to believers, and here Jesus says they will have his own name written on them. Jesus has a “name written that no one knows but himself” (Rev. 19:12). In other words, no one holds power or sovereignty over Jesus. True believers “hold fast” and don't deny Jesus' name (2:13; 3:8), and his name is inscribed on their foreheads (14:1; 22:4). The main point here is clear: having Jesus' name means believers belong to Jesus and are protected by his love and power.

3:13 As in the other letters, the words of Jesus are also the words of the Spirit, and the message is directed to all the churches, not just the church at Philadelphia. Hence, believers in all the churches are exhorted to pay attention to the message from the Spirit.

Response

Believers in Jesus Christ are the true Israel, the true people of God. The Jewish synagogue at Philadelphia believed they were true Jews, but the roles have been reversed. In the future, they will acknowledge believers in Jesus (both Jew and Gentile) as God's chosen. The true Jerusalem, the heavenly Jerusalem, the eschatological Jerusalem, belongs to Christians. So, too, believers will be members of the end-time temple—the new universe where God dwells in everything. Revelation promises repeatedly that a great reward will be given to those who are faithful to Jesus Christ. Even if our power is small, like the church of Philadelphia, even if

our church seems slight or insignificant, a door is opened for us that will never be closed. God protects and defends those who belong to him. When judgments are unleashed on the earth, he will guard and keep us from committing apostasy or falling away from the truth. We will safely make it across the Jordan and enjoy God's presence forever.

REVELATION 3:14–22

¹⁴“And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

¹⁵“‘I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. ¹⁹Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. ²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. ²¹The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²²He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’”

Section Overview

Jesus introduces himself to the Laodicean church as the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the new creation. The letter is like the one to Sardis, for the church receives no commendation but a severe rebuke. The church is nauseatingly lukewarm, and thus Jesus is about to spit them from his mouth. Astonishingly, the church thinks they are doing well, but Jesus reveals their true state: they need to come to him to be restored. The difficult words addressed to the church are evidence of Jesus' love. He calls on the church to repent. He stands at the door of the church and knocks, and they must open the door and repent for Jesus to eat with them. Only those who conquer will rule with Jesus, and the message for the Laodiceans is the word of the Spirit for all the churches.

Section Outline

- II. Letters to the Seven Churches (2:1–3:22) . . .
 - G. Laodicea (3:14–22)

Comment

3:14 The letter is addressed to “the angel of the church in Laodicea” (cf. comment on 2:1), a church self-satisfied and self-sufficient. This fits with the history of the city. It suffered an earthquake in AD 60 and declined imperial help since it was wealthy enough to rebuild itself. The city was renowned for its medical and textile industries (cf. 3:17–18), including its treatment of eye disease, and was also well known for its worship of Zeus. The church was not a faithful witness, but Jesus is faithful. He is God’s “Amen,” the faithful and true witness (cf. 1:5; 3:7; 19:11; Isa. 65:16). He lived his life for the glory of God. Even in his suffering he remained faithful, showing himself to be God’s anointed one. In declaring Jesus the “beginning of God’s creation,” John doesn’t mean Jesus was created by God or was a creature. Such a conclusion would contradict the many statements of Jesus’ divinity in the letter.²⁰ Instead, the point is that Jesus, as the “faithful witness,” was the “firstborn of the dead” (Rev. 1:5). By his resurrection he is the beginning of God’s new creation. Colossians 1:18 points us in the same direction, declaring Jesus to be the “beginning, the firstborn from the dead.” “Beginning” (*archē*) in Colossians 1:18 is the same term found in Revelation 3:14. In both instances, the point is that Jesus is the beginning of the new creation as the resurrected and exalted Lord. Such an affirmation does not deny or contradict that as the Son of God he is the eternal one, without beginning or end (cf. Rev. 22:13). Why does Jesus tell the church at Laodicea that the new creation begins with him? Because, as the one in whom God’s eschatological promises are fulfilled, he has the resources to grant them everything they need (cf. 3:18, 20). They are to come to Jesus so that he might supply what is lacking in their lives.

3:15 We expect a commendation of the church here, in line with the structure of the other letters, and it appears that such will follow, for Jesus says he knows their works. Any compliments are cut short, however, for Jesus says the church is “neither cold nor hot.” Laodiceans did not drink the water from the nearby Lycus River, for it was dirty and unfit to drink. An aqueduct brought water from hot springs 5 miles (8 km) away, but by the time the water arrived in Laodicea, it was lukewarm. Cold water from nearby Colossae was likewise lukewarm upon arrival in Laodicea. Hot water is a tonic, and cold water is refreshing, both representing what is good and pleasant. But lukewarm water is repulsive. Jesus wishes the church were “cold or hot.” He doesn’t mean “bad or good,” for both cold and hot water, as we have seen, are positive, symbolizing a life that is productive and invigorating. What brings Jesus’ reproof is that they are neither cold nor hot.

3:16 Once we understand the significance of hot and cold in verse 15, Jesus’ words in this verse make perfect sense. He wishes the church was either refreshingly cold or intensely hot, but instead they are nauseatingly lukewarm. They have lost their spiritual tonic and fervency. Jesus will treat them, unless they repent, as one would

²⁰ See the discussion of Christology in the Introduction.

react to lukewarm water: he will spit them from his mouth. We are reminded of how the Canaanites were “vomited” out of the land for their evil (Lev. 18:25, 28). The picture of Jesus’ spitting people out of his mouth is shocking, but it represents the truth that Jesus would have nothing to do with the Laodicean church if it remained in its current state. They had no warrant for assurance of salvation if they continued along the path they were walking.

3:17 The true condition of the Laodicean church was not reflected in their self-perception—they were convinced that they were doing well (cf. Hos. 12:8; 1 Cor. 4:8). The city was economically prosperous, and the church believed they were flourishing spiritually as well. They thought they had arrived, that they didn’t need anything. They characterized themselves as spiritually rich, and certainly didn’t think they were lukewarm. Jesus’ words must have come as a shock, intended to puncture their complacency (cf. 1 Cor. 4:8). The words are piled up to unmask their weakness: wretched, in desperate need of mercy, poor, blind, and naked. The city was known for its medical facilities, especially concerning eye disease. But they couldn’t perceive that they were spiritually blind and naked (Rev. 16:15), that the “emperor wore no clothes.”

3:18 Jesus advises the church as to what to do in their desperate situation. Since the city was famous for its wealth, textile industries, and medical expertise, Jesus applies these matters to the spiritual health of the church. Since they were spiritually poor, they needed to buy gold from Jesus to become wealthy (cf. Isa. 55:1–2). They were seeking wealth in the wrong place—material prosperity—when they should have been finding their wealth in Christ. They needed to purchase white garments from him to cover their nakedness, which could stand for their idolatry in loving the riches of this world (Isa. 47:3; Ezek. 16:36; Nah. 3:5). The beautiful and expensive garments made in Laodicea, renowned for its black wool, didn’t truly cover them. Similarly, Jesus has salve for their eyes so that they can truly see. The point of all three illustrations is that the believers need to depend upon Jesus for everything, to humble themselves and realize that they cannot accomplish anything on their own.

3:19 Jesus’ words don’t come from hatred, nor are they harsh. They are words of love, for true love reproves and disciplines. Hebrews notes that the “Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6), just as a father reproves his son in whom he delights (cf. Prov. 3:12). The believers must respond to such fatherly admonitions and reproof with zeal and repentance. No halfhearted response will do. The matter is urgent, and the spiritual life of the church is in critical condition.

3:20 The gravity of the situation is communicated by another illustration. Jesus is standing at the door of the church and knocking. It is as if they have left him outside their lives and conducted their affairs without him. The believers must hear his voice, which requires repentance, and open the door to him. If they do so, he

will sit down and feast with them. Perhaps the meal in view here is the messianic banquet of the end time (Isa. 25:6; Luke 22:30; cf. Rev. 19:9).

3:21 Jesus returns to a theme we saw in the letter to Pergamum (cf. comments on 2:26–27): Those who overcome will rule with Jesus. The reign of Jesus is shared with all his saints, all those who belong to him. Jesus himself is the model for believers, for he overcame through his faithful witness (cf. 3:14) and thus was exalted and sat down at the right hand of the Father, to rule with him. So too, the Laodiceans must be faithful and humble, for only the faithful and humble will be exalted.

3:22 The bracing message here isn't limited to the Laodiceans but captures the message of the Spirit for all the churches. Every church is liable to the same errors as the church at Laodicea.

Response

This letter sounds a warning about self-deception. Feeling good about ourselves or the state of our church does not necessarily mean we are spiritually vibrant. We may congratulate ourselves on our spiritual riches while actually being destitute and weak. We may confuse economic riches with spiritual riches, making our wealth an idol. It is better to recognize daily that we stand in desperate need of the grace of God. Without Jesus we can do nothing and are nothing (John 15:5). Every day we need his grace anew, and his grace shines most powerfully in our weakness (2 Cor. 12:9). The letter to the Laodiceans also reminds us that love is sometimes tough. True love confronts and reproves, and exposes the evil of the beloved. Our culture defines love in terms of tenderness and affirmation, and such qualities are expressions of love, but love also disciplines and reprimands, so that the beloved may grow more and more into the likeness of Christ.

REVELATION 4:1–11

4 After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” ² At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne. ³ And he who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian, and around the throne was a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. ⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. ⁵ From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings¹ and peals of thunder, and before the throne

were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God,
⁶and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like an eagle in flight. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within, and day and night they never cease to say,

“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty,
 who was and is and is to come!”

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall down before him who is seated on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They cast their crowns before the throne, saying,

¹¹ “Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
 to receive glory and honor and power,
 for you created all things,
 and by your will they existed and were created.”

¹Or *voices, or sounds*

Section Overview

Following the letters to the seven churches, the scene shifts to heaven, where God sits on the throne. Chapter 4 is foundational for the remainder of the book. Before we read anything else, John declares that the creator of all things reigns and should be worshiped. The power of evil is great and must never be denied or ignored, but God, as the creator of all, is greater than any kingdom or being. John is suddenly catapulted into heaven (Rev. 4:1); he sees God seated on his throne, and the splendor and beauty of God defies description (vv. 2–3). The remainder of the chapter concentrates on the other beings surrounding the throne. We are introduced first to the twenty-four elders, who also sit on thrones (v. 4). Meanwhile, something like ear-splitting thunder and lightning issues from God’s throne. There we find the seven spirits of God and a sea of glass, like crystal, stretching before the throne (vv. 5–6). Then the scene shifts to four living beings (vv. 6–7), harking back to the four living creatures of Ezekiel (chs. 1 and 10) and the seraphim of Isaiah (ch. 6). What is most important is their exclamation, lauding God as the thrice-holy one (Rev. 4:8), the one utterly distinct from and exalted over all creation. The passage comes to a climax in verses 9–11. The four living beings give glory and honor to God on the throne, and the twenty-four elders join and bow down in worship and cast their crowns before the throne. They confess God as worthy to be worshiped, deserving all honor and glory as the creator of all things. The passage concludes, then, on this note of praise and worship of the sovereign Creator.

Section Outline

III. Visions in the Throne Room (4:1–5:14)

A. God as the Holy Creator (4:1–11)

Comment

4:1 John's vision continues with a revelation of the throne room of God. The language used here is full of symbolism and must not be interpreted literally, as if we have a literal picture of God's throne room. The opening of heaven means God is about to disclose a matter of great importance to all mankind (cf. Luke 3:21; John 1:51; Acts 7:56; 10:11; Rev. 19:11). The parallel in Ezekiel is particularly apt, for Ezekiel says the "heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God" (Ezek. 1:1). So too here, the voice John first heard booming like a trumpet (cf. Rev. 1:10) speaks to him again, summoning him to come to heaven. Clearly this is not the rapture of the church, for what happens here is confined to John alone. Indeed, the book of Revelation never mentions a "rapture." Presumably, John went to heaven in a visionary state, not literally. God reveals to John what will occur "after this." The temporal reference is quite general, for much in the subsequent chapters relays events that are already happening or have already happened (e.g., the events in 12:1–6). For instance, God has always reigned on the throne (4:1–11), and Christ's death (5:1–13) is a past event. Thus, the phrase "after this" refers to the next vision, not to the sequence in which the events occurred or will occur in history.

4:2 John was immediately "in the Spirit," meaning that he was about to receive revelation from God as a prophet and apostle—the Spirit was about to disclose to him the things of God (cf. comment on 1:10). John sees a throne in heaven (cf. Ps. 11:4) and God seated on the throne. Amid a world opposed to God, a world in which evil is horrific, John reminds his readers: God reigns! Psalm 103:19 captures this truth: "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." John pulls back the curtain so that we see what is happening in the heavens.

4:3 What is this God on the throne like? The word "appearance" occurs twice, translating the phrase *homoios horasei* in Greek. This is not a literal picture of God. John uses imagery and symbolism to convey his message, as no one can see or describe God as he actually is, for his glory is beyond human capacities. John describes him in terms of stones such as jasper and carnelian and a rainbow like an emerald. It is difficult to find one-to-one correspondence between the stones named and qualities or attributes of God, though they certainly convey his beauty, glory, and wealth. The stones are found in the ephod of the high priest (Ex. 25:7; 28:17, 18; 35:9, 27), in Eden (Ezek. 28:13), and in the promised new Jerusalem (Isa. 54:12; Rev. 21:11, 18, 19, 20). The portrait of God here echoes Ezekiel 1:26–28:

Above the expanse over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness with a human appearance. And upward from what had the

appearance of his waist I saw as it were gleaming metal, like the appearance of fire enclosed all around. And downward from what had the appearance of his waist I saw as it were the appearance of fire, and there was brightness around him. Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around.

Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking.

The stones in Revelation and the vision in Ezekiel demonstrate that the purpose of the description is to emphasize the unparalleled and indescribable beauty and glory of God. Seeing him, as Ezekiel records, casts us down on our faces.

4:4 The throne room isn't occupied only by God. There are also twenty-four elders sitting on twenty-four thrones surrounding God's throne. Their white garments denote that they are worthy, that they are pure enough to stand in God's presence. The thrones and crowns on their heads signify their rule. Who are these elders? It is very attractive to understand them as humans. Elsewhere in the OT and the NT the term "elders" refers to men (e.g., Ex. 3:16; 19:7; 24:1; Matt. 15:2; 16:21; Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17). The only exception is possibly Isaiah 24:23. Some see them as a priestly entity, for in the OT the priests served in twenty-four courses (1 Chron. 24:7–18) and enjoyed special access to God. The number twenty-four may also stand for the twelve apostles together with the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Rev. 21:12, 14), i.e., the church and Israel. The twenty-four elders, then, would stand for the entire people of God. Their robes are white because they were cleansed by the blood of the Lamb (7:13–14) and lived righteous lives (3:4–5), and the thrones designate their rule.

Despite the appeal of seeing a reference to human beings, however, it is more likely that the twenty-four elders are angels, for the following reasons: (1) When the twenty-four elders praise the Lamb for ransoming people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, they don't include themselves among the redeemed (5:9). Instead the elders exclaim, "You have made *them* a kingdom and priests to our God, and *they* shall reign on the earth." It is striking that the elders don't say "we" enjoy the kingdom and priesthood but describe the reign in the third person. (2) What is also striking is that the twenty-four elders are always mentioned alongside the four living creatures and other angels elsewhere in Revelation (4:9–10; 5:2, 5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 14:3; 19:4), suggesting that they too are angels.

Still, it doesn't follow that a reference to human beings is completely out of the question, for the twenty-four elders *represent* human beings before the throne, just as each church in the seven letters is represented by an angel. Hence, the elders present the prayers of God's people before his throne and represent his people in the heavenly court.

4:5 The scene shifts to what is happening in the throne room. It isn't a quiet affair; a massive thunderstorm is erupting, echoing the storm that broke out on Mount

Sinai when the Lord descended to reveal himself to Israel (Ex. 19:16, 18–19). Remarkably, the seventh seal (Rev. 8:5), the seventh trumpet (11:19), and the seventh bowl (16:18) are also marked by lightning storms. The thunder and lightning communicate the awesomeness of God and the terror of entering his presence. The seven torches also hark back to Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:18), and to other OT texts as well (Ezek. 1:13; Dan. 10:6). As was explained in the comment on Revelation 1:4, the seven spirits of God refer to the perfection of the Holy Spirit. All the divine perfections belong to the Spirit. The seven flaming torches and the seven spirits communicate the holiness of God. Entering God's presence is frightening because he is ever and always the Holy One. God reveals himself as the *Holy* Spirit, for holiness represents his being as the everlasting God.

4:6 It is a bit difficult to know what the “sea of glass, like crystal” before God's throne signifies (cf. 15:2; Ezek. 1:22). In Hebrew thought, the sea often denotes evil and chaos (cf. Job 7:12; 26:12; 38:8; Pss. 74:13; 78:53; 89:9; 114:3, 5; Isa. 57:20; Rev. 21:1). Perhaps it signifies God's rule over evil. Glass and crystal can also signify priceless beauty. It more likely denotes an impassable barrier. No one can come into the presence of God casually and easily; there is a great gulf separating human beings from God.

There are remarkable creatures guarding and surrounding the throne, again highlighting God's awesome holiness. Perhaps these creatures “bear up the moveable throne of God.”²¹ There are four of these living creatures, with “eyes in front and behind.” John draws here on the vision of Ezekiel, who sees four living creatures (Ezek. 1:5) and later identifies them as cherubim (Ezek. 10:15, 20). These strange and wonderful creatures in Revelation, like the cherubim in Ezekiel, protect and surround God's throne. In the OT, cherubim guarded the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). In the tabernacle and the temple, cherubim hovered over the mercy seat, symbolizing their guarding of God's presence (Ex. 25:18–22; Num. 7:89; 1 Kings 6:23–28; 8:6, 7). Cherubim were also woven into the curtains of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:1; 36:8) and carved on the walls of the temple (1 Kings 6:29, 32, 35; cf. Ezek. 41:18, 20, 25). The OT speaks of Yahweh being enthroned on cherubim (1 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chron. 13:6; Pss. 80:1; 99:1). In Ezekiel the cherubim play an important role as God's presence leaves the temple because of Israel's sin (Ezek. 10:1–22; 11:22). The cherubim were associated, as are the four living creatures, with God's presence and throne. The “eyes” don't signify omniscience, as only God is omniscient, but they show the four living creatures searching the entire creation, vigilantly watching over the world as God's agents.

4:7 The four living creatures are described. The first is like a lion, the second is like an ox, the third has a face like a human being, and the fourth is like an eagle flying. The author uses similes here; the creatures aren't identified as a lion, ox,

21 Aune, *Revelation* 1–5, 297.

human being, or eagle. Instead they share a likeness (*homoion*) with them. The creatures chosen are fascinating, for the lion is, as we say, “king of the beasts” (cf. Prov. 30:30); oxen are the most powerful domesticated animals; human beings are the crown of creation; and eagles are the most majestic birds (Job 39:27; Prov. 30:19). John clearly draws on Ezekiel’s vision of the cherubim (cf. Ezekiel 1; 10), though he doesn’t explicitly identify the four living creatures as cherubim. There is another difference with the account in Ezekiel, for in Ezekiel each of the four living creatures has four faces: the faces of a human being, a lion, an ox, and an eagle (Ezek. 1:10; 10:14). In Revelation the four living creatures do not have four faces. Instead, one has a face like a human being, another a face like a lion, another like an ox, and another like an eagle. John often tweaks the OT text he alludes to, though it is difficult to discern any significance to the change from the OT here. It seems the four living creatures are angelic, since they are described in terms of the cherubim in Ezekiel (cf. comment on Rev. 4:8), and thus seem to represent the highest order of angels. The representations of these creatures, then, are symbolic and should not be taken literally. These angelic living creatures represent all of creation, signifying the calling of all creatures everywhere to praise God. Nothing is more beautiful and satisfying than worshiping God before his throne.

4:8 Now the four living creatures are described in a way echoing the seraphim of Isaiah 6. This confirms the living creatures’ angelic identity, but it is difficult to determine whether the living creatures are cherubim or seraphim, since John draws on both Ezekiel and Isaiah in describing them. However, it is also possible that “seraphim” and “cherubim” are two names for the same angels, for we must confess we know very little about angelic ranks and categories (cf. Col. 1:16). In any case, the four living creatures, like the seraphim, have six wings. In Isaiah the seraphim cover their faces with two of their wings, cover their feet with two wings, and fly with the remaining two (Isa. 6:2). They cover their faces and feet because of the awesome holiness of God. They fly because they are devoted to God’s service, flying to carry out his will and directions. John draws on the cherubim again in saying they are full of eyes (cf. Ezek. 1:18; 10:12), denoting their vigilance in guarding God’s throne.

Though there are dimensions of the verse that elude our grasp, the most important element is the exclamation of the four living creatures, echoing the words of the seraphim in Isaiah 6:3. They proclaim that the God sitting on the throne is the thrice-holy one. The whole scene at the throne communicates God’s terrifying and beautiful holiness. He is utterly exalted above his creatures and is distinct from human beings. No one enters his presence lightly or casually, for he is Almighty God and, as we saw in Revelation 1:4 (cf. comment), he is the one who always reigned, the one who is reigning, and the one who will come and institute his kingdom forever.

4:9 The living creatures worship God who reigns and sits on the throne by giving him glory, honor, and thanks. Paul teaches that God is honored as God when people give him praise and thanks (Rom. 1:21), and here he is praised for his sovereign

rule as the living God. As the creator of all he deserves praise, worship, and honor. As the King of the universe, he reigns and lives forever.

4:10 The twenty-four elders join the worship of God on the throne (cf. 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). The focus of the text is not on the four living creatures or twenty-four elders, as strange and fascinating as they are. The twenty-four elders bow down before God, who rules on his throne and is the ever-living one (cf. 11:17; Dan. 4:34). They cast their crowns before the throne to show that any rule or responsibility they have is given back to God. All the elders have and enjoy is given them by God, and thus they gratefully give it back to him. Anything good that they possess or have done is a gift of God (cf. 1 Cor. 4:7).

4:11 The suffering church, under pressure from Rome and Jewish opponents, is reminded that God is the sovereign creator of all things, and therefore deserves their worship, thanks, and praise. Worship must be given not to the emperor or the beast but to God alone. The churches in Revelation are to hallow God's name on earth, just as it is hallowed in heaven by the twenty-four elders and four living creatures (Matt. 6:9–10).

Response

Christians who are suffering, indeed all Christians, are prone to forget about God. The circumstances of life can overwhelm us, so that we fix our attention entirely on ourselves. Revelation 4 lifts our eyes to the most important being in the universe and summons us to behold our God. And this God is sitting on his throne. Despite the evil in the world, God reigns and rules. When we see God, we realize he is indescribably majestic, beautiful, lovely, and awesome. And we confess that the God we worship is infinitely holy. None of us is worthy to stand in his presence, and hence there is a great gulf between us and God, breached only by Jesus Christ. God is glorious and deserves all worship as creator of all things. How easy it is for us to take for granted what it means for him to be the creator of everything. For God to create all things means he has breathtaking power and authority. We are mere creatures, weak and finite, but he is Almighty God, the Holy One of Israel, the maker of all things, the one who deserves all our worship and praise.

REVELATION 5:1–14

5 Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals. ²And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” ³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, ⁴and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. ⁵And one of the elders said to me, “Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song, saying,

“Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on the earth.”

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, ¹²saying with a loud voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!”

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

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Section Overview

The scene in the throne room shifts. God is holding a scroll with seven seals (Rev. 5:1). The question echoes throughout creation: Is anyone worthy to break the seals on the scroll (v. 2)? The key word in the chapter is “worthy” (*axios*): no one in all creation is worthy to break the seals (v. 3). The seals represent redemptive history and God’s plan for history, including saving human beings, so if no one can open the scroll or break the seals, the human race is doomed. Hence John weeps upon discovering that no one can open the scroll (v. 4). But John’s tears are not the final word, for he is told there is one who has conquered and can open the seals: Jesus the Christ, the Lion of Judah and descendant of David (v. 5). And yet, when John looks in the throne room, he sees not a Lion but a Lamb (v. 6)! Indeed, he sees a Lamb who was slain but is now standing as the risen Lamb, and this Lamb is full of strength and has sent his Spirit (as a result of his death and resurrection) into the world.

In a moment of great triumph and joy, the Lamb approaches the throne and takes the scroll (v. 7). The twenty-four elders and four living creatures worship the Lamb as they present the prayers of the saints, fulfilled in the redemption wrought by the Lamb (v. 8). They break forth into worship and song (vv. 9–10). They exclaim that the Lamb is worthy to take the scroll and break its seals because by his death he has ransomed some from every people group. God’s promise that human beings shall reign as kings and priests will be realized because of the atoning work of the Lamb. In response to this declaration, all the angelic powers break forth again into praise, declaring that the Lamb is worthy of all power and praise as the one who gave his life for sinners (vv. 11–12). Then the chorus breaks in, consisting this time of all of creation, confessing that God and the Lamb together deserve all praise and glory (v. 13). The awesomeness of the scene cannot be reproduced. The four living creatures cry out “Amen,” and the twenty-four elders lie prostrate in glad and humble worship (v. 14).

Section Outline

- III. Visions in the Throne Room (4:1–5:14) . . .
 - B. The Lamb as Redeemer (5:1–14)

Comment

5:1 The twenty-four elders and four living creatures worship God who sits on the throne. John then sees God holding in his right hand a scroll with writing on both sides, sealed with seven seals. It would be most unusual for a scroll to have writing on both sides (cf. Ezek. 2:9–10), and the meaning of that amount of writing is hard to decipher. Perhaps it signifies the many events encompassed on the scroll. The scroll, as we shall see, represents redemptive history and God’s purposes for the entire creation, especially human beings. Still, the scroll is securely sealed with seven seals, and thus what is written on the scroll will not take place unless the

seals are broken (cf. Isa. 29:11). We are reminded of Daniel, whose book is sealed until the end of time (Dan. 12:4, 9).

5:2 The vision continues, as John conveys to his reader the drama of what he sees. He could have summarized and simply told us that only Jesus could open the scroll, but he slows the story down so that we appreciate and rejoice in the majesty of the one who opens the scroll. John sees a mighty angel announcing his question loudly to the entire creation—the central question posed in chapter 5: Is there anyone “worthy” (*axios*) to break open the seals? The narrative slows with a question and answer format, and the reader pauses at each moment to reflect on the question of utmost importance for mankind: Who is worthy?

5:3 The answer to the question is now given, and it is a crushing disappointment: No one is able to open the scroll or look at its contents (cf. Phil. 2:10). And no one, as John emphasizes, truly means *no one*. There is no heavenly being, no angel, who can open the scroll. Nor is there anyone on earth who can do so. Nor is there anyone under the earth, in the realm of the dead, who can open it.

5:4 Again we see the narrative creeping along for dramatic effect, for now John shares with us his psychological response to the inability of anyone to open the scroll or see its contents. The scroll, as we shall see, must be opened for God’s purposes to be realized in history and for humans to be redeemed from their evil. Hence John weeps “loudly” when the scroll cannot be opened (cf. Isa. 29:11). A sense of hopelessness and despair and grief grips him. John wants the reader to feel how bleak and desperate life would be if the scroll remained sealed. The reason no one in all creation can open the scroll is that “no one was found worthy” before God. “Found” (*heurethē*) suggests a law court, where one stands before a judge (LXX Pss. 16:3; 35:3; Isa. 53:9; Ezek. 28:15; Gal. 2:17; Phil. 3:9; 2 Pet. 3:14; Rev. 20:15; cf. *Sir.* 31:8; 44:17). Human beings are unworthy because of their sin. John doesn’t tell us why angels are not worthy, but presumably it is because they aren’t human, for humans can be rescued only by another human (cf. Heb. 2:5–18). In any case, the weight of none being worthy lands on readers with great impact, leading to unparalleled grief and sorrow. There is no hope for the human race if the scroll with the seals cannot be opened.

5:5 The narrative takes a dramatic turn, just at the moment when there seemed to be no exit or hope. One of the twenty-four elders addresses John and enjoins him to cease weeping, for one has been found who has conquered and is able to open the seven seals. This one is the Lion from Judah’s tribe, the Messiah from David’s line. John emphasizes that believers must “conquer” in order to obtain eternal life (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7), but the saints will not and cannot conquer unless the Lion conquers first. *Their* conquering is derived from and dependent upon *his* conquering. His conquering is foundational, and their overcoming is the consequence of his triumph. We also perceive that opening the seals is not merely an academic matter. Breaking open this scroll is a matter of

war; a great enemy must be defeated and thrown down for the scroll to be opened (cf. Gen. 3:15). A formidable enemy can be vanquished only by one with incredible strength. The victory has been won by the Davidic Messiah, by Jesus the Lion from Judah's tribe. John reaches back to an early prophecy in Genesis, where Judah is given the prominence and rule over his brothers and his enemies (Gen. 49:8). He is as fierce as a lion over his prey, and no one can stand against him (Gen. 49:9; cf. Num. 23:24; 24:9). The scepter and the staff belong to Judah, and the obedience of all peoples will be given to him (Gen. 49:10).

John sees this prophecy as having been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, for the promise of Judah's rule is extended and clarified in the covenant made with David (cf. Rev. 22:16): the Lord promises an heir of David will rule forever (2 Sam. 7:12–14; Pss. 89:3–4, 28–29, 33–37; 132:11). The prophets reaffirm that the promise to David has not been withdrawn, that one of his heirs will reign and bring salvation to Israel (e.g., Isa. 9:6–7; 55:3; Jer. 23:5–6; 30:9; 33:15–17, 20–22, 25–26; Ezek. 34:23–24; 37:24–27; Hos. 3:5). The promise isn't merely that a Davidic king will reign, but that he will fulfill the promises made to Abraham (e.g., Gen. 12:1–3), so salvation will come to Israel and indeed to all nations, whereas those who resist the Lord will be cursed. So, it is significant that the Lion of Judah is clarified to be the Root of David, indicating that the victory is achieved through a son of David, through the covenant made with him. The wording is drawn explicitly from Isaiah 11:1 and 11:10. Isaiah 11:1 says, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit," and verse 10 says, "In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious." Sandwiched between these verses is the promise of the new creation that will dawn through the root of David. He shall conquer his enemies and shepherd those who belong to him. Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, has conquered as the OT prophesied and therefore *he* will open the seven-sealed scroll.

5:6 As a result of the encouraging words from one of the elders (v. 5), John looks at the throne and sees in the midst of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders a Lamb standing. This is quite remarkable, for John was *told* about a Lion but he *sees* a Lamb. The Lamb is standing "as though it had been slain." John isn't saying that the Lamb wasn't really slain. The Lamb was indeed slain but is now standing. The standing of the Lamb represents Jesus' resurrection and victory over death. Yes, he was slain for the sake of his people, but he now stands in the midst of the throne in triumph (cf. Gen. 3:15).

The notion of the Lamb being slain has many biblical antecedents. It draws on the Passover lamb, slaughtered to deliver the firstborn in Israel (Ex. 12:3–5). Lambs were also offered both morning and evening for the daily burnt offering (Ex. 29:39–41) bringing atonement for Israel (Lev. 1:4). The suffering servant is "like a lamb . . . led to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7), and the word "slaughter" (*sphagē*) in the Greek translation of Isaiah is the noun form of the verb "slain" (*sphazō*) used

in Revelation. The verb “slain” is used for the Passover lamb (Ex. 12:6) and burnt offerings (Lev. 1:5) as well. Perhaps all three backgrounds are in view here, so that we have an allusion to Passover, sacrificial offerings, and the servant of the Lord. We also see connections with the rest of the NT. In John 1:29 the Baptist exclaims that Jesus is the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus’ role as the Lamb and the servant of the Lord is noted by Philip in his conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:32; cf. 1 Pet. 2:22–24). Paul identifies Jesus as the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), and Peter says that Jesus is a “lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). The importance of the Lamb is evident in Revelation, for this is the first of twenty-six times Jesus is identified as the Lamb. Certainly, Jesus’ self-giving in death for the sake of his people is the center of the NT witness.

We learn from John’s portrait that Jesus conquers not as a Lion but as a Lamb. The seven-sealed book is opened, not because he mauled his opponents but because he gave his life for sinners. He triumphs through suffering and death instead of through the destruction of his opponents with overwhelming force. As the risen one, he stands triumphant as the slain Lamb. He stands in victory and with almighty strength, for he has “seven horns.” Horns designate strength, and “seven” here indicates perfect and infinite power. The one who was slain as a Lamb now reigns as the Lion and the Lamb. He also has “seven eyes,” probably denoting his omniscience. In apocalyptic literature, an image can be used in more than one way. The seven eyes also signify the “seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” As I argued in my comment on 1:4, the seven spirits refer to the completeness and fullness of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is sent out as a result of Jesus’ resurrection, and such a notion fits with the rest of the NT. The Spirit isn’t given until Jesus is exalted (John 7:39), and the Holy Spirit isn’t poured out until Jesus ascends (Acts 1:1–11; 2:33). The gift of the Spirit is given because Jesus is crucified, risen, and ascended.

5:7 The Lion who is also the Lamb approaches the throne and takes the scroll from God’s right hand. He has the authority to take the scroll from God because of his death and resurrection. We see again that the key unlocking history is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

5:8 As is his custom throughout this chapter, John continues to slow the narrative. The Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of God. When he takes it, the four living creatures and twenty-four elders fall before the Lamb in worship. The Lamb is worshiped just as God was worshiped in Revelation 4:10, showing that the Lamb is fully God. The Lamb is worshiped because, as the slain and risen one, he opens the scroll and redeems his people. The use of “harps” by the four living creatures signifies their joy, rooted in God’s faithful and saving love for his people (cf. the LXX of Pss. 32:2; 56:9; 70:22; 80:3; 91:4; 97:5; 107:3; 146:7; 150:3). So too in Revelation, the angels have harps because they are filled with joy on account of the saving work of the slain Lamb, even though the angels themselves are not the recipients of God’s saving love. The angels also have golden bowls of incense,

representing the saints' prayers (Rev. 8:3–4). This recalls the OT altar of incense (Ex. 30:1–10). David asks that his prayer be “counted as incense” before God (Ps. 141:2). John picks up that image here, comparing prayer to incense. Incense was pleasing to God. In the same way, the prayers of the saints are pleasing to God. Furthermore, the redemption accomplished by the Lamb fulfills the prayers of the saints and the longings of their hearts (cf. Ex. 2:23–25; Deut. 26:7).

5:9 The angels, in response to the Lamb's taking the scroll, sing a “new song” before the Lord (cf. 14:3). In the OT, God's people sing a new song when he intervenes and saves and delivers them (cf. Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10). A new song is sung because God has done a new work for those who belong to him. Indeed, Christ's work on the cross is God's decisive work of salvation; the cross of Christ is the center of history. Thus the angels praise God as they see his saving work for the sake of his people.

John wept because no one was found “worthy” (*axios*) to open the scroll and break its seals (Rev. 5:2–4). But now the four living creatures and twenty-four elders exclaim, “worthy” (*axios*) is the Lamb. As the Lion from Judah's tribe, the Lamb who was slain, he is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals. Now the same word is used of the Lamb (“worthy”) that was used of God the Creator in 4:11. God was worshiped as Creator, and Christ is worshiped as Redeemer.

The text specifically provides the reason (“for,” *hoti*) the Lamb is worthy of worship. It is because he is the slain Lamb, and the next line explains the reason he was slain: because man was enslaved to sin (1:5), Jesus “ransomed” (*ēgorasas*; also in 14:3–4) with his blood people from every ethnic group. The twenty-four elders don't praise God for their own deliverance but for the deliverance of human beings, suggesting the elders are angels instead of human beings (cf. comments on 4:4; 5:10). The addition of the word “blood” indicates Jesus' death was sacrificial (cf. Lev. 17:11)—he gave his life for the atonement of his people. Their robes were made white by the Lamb's blood (Rev. 7:14), and they conquered by his blood (12:11). The seven-sealed scroll couldn't be opened by any human because all have sinned, but the Lamb's blood liberated people from sin's captivity. The ransoming includes those from every people group: from “every tribe and language and people and nation.” Jesus didn't redeem every person without exception, but some from every people group without distinction. We see here that the Lamb's blood secured forgiveness for those who are his. In the cross, redemption is accomplished and applied.

5:10 The Lamb ransomed his people for a purpose, fulfilling the original mandate given to Adam and Eve to rule the world for God (Gen. 1:28; 2:15). We note again that the angels don't include themselves in this future reign but use the third person “they” to refer to the rule of humans. Through Jesus' redeeming work, believers are now “a kingdom and priests” (cf. comment on Rev. 1:6). The role appointed for Israel (Ex. 19:6; Isa. 61:6; cf. Isa. 66:21) has been granted to the church of Jesus Christ, composed of both Jews and Gentiles. God's kingdom has now come, at least in part, through the church of Jesus Christ. The church isn't coterminous

with the kingdom, yet the power of the kingdom is present in the church. At the same time, the church exercises priesthood, so access to God is mediated through the message proclaimed by the church. Still, the fullness of the kingdom will be realized only in the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21:1–22:5).

The future tense of the phrase “they shall reign on the earth” represents the better reading textually and focuses on the future. John looks forward to the day when the church’s commission will be realized completely. John has already intimated this future reign when he promises that the churches that conquer will reign with Christ (2:26–27; 3:21). The church’s reign isn’t autonomous; it rules with Christ and, as these verses clarify, *because of* Christ. The reign of the people of God is rooted in Christ’s redeeming work. The four living creatures and twenty-four elders explode with joy because God’s purposes for his creation will come to pass; what is written on the seals (God’s plan for the world) will be not frustrated, but fulfilled.

5:11 The realization of God’s saving and creational purposes through the slain Lamb leads to the next scene. John looks at the throne room again and now sees and hears a veritable outpouring of joy. The throne room is packed with angelic powers: the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, and uncountable angels. We have further evidence that the twenty-four elders are angels, for they are always placed with other angelic powers in contrast to human beings. The scene is reminiscent of the courtroom in Daniel (cf. Ps. 68:17), where a “thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Dan. 7:10); and of Hebrews, which speaks of “innumerable angels in festal gathering” (Heb. 12:22). John doesn’t simply see this incalculable assembly; he *hears* them, bringing us to the next verse.

5:12 The myriad angels are thundering with a loud voice, and the first word out of their mouths is “worthy” (*axion*). This word has dominated the chapter (5:2, 4, 9), and once again the angels proclaim that the slain Lamb is worthy. John underscores that it was the Lamb’s death that opened the seals. John isn’t saying the Lamb is worthy merely *because* he was slain; he teaches that the one who is slain *is* worthy, and because he is worthy his death effectively redeems his people (5:9).

The Lamb is worthy of the same worship as God, and thus should be given “power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” These accolades could be interpreted two ways, and it is difficult to choose between them. Perhaps John is simply saying that power, wealth, wisdom, etc., should be ascribed to the Lamb as things that were eternally his. Or perhaps he is emphasizing that power, might, honor, and glory should be given to the Lamb especially as a result of his redeeming work. In other words, Jesus should be honored and worshiped as the God-man, for in the exaltation of Jesus Christ a new stage in redemptive history is realized (cf. Acts 2:36; Rom. 1:4). Given the emphasis on the Lamb’s death, it seems the latter is preferable, but in either case the Lamb is worshiped as divine and has the same stature as God, who reigns on the throne.

5:13 The worship that began with countless angels reverberates throughout the universe, and now all creation joins in. We saw in Revelation 5:3 that *no one* in heaven, on earth, or under the earth could open the sealed scroll. Now *every creature* in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea joins in to praise God and the Lamb. The worship is universal—no one is excepted. Does it include unbelievers? We know that some are in the lake of fire, not inscribed in the book of life (19:20; 20:10–15). If they are included, their worship isn't glad but compulsory (cf. Phil. 2:10–11; Isa. 45:24). But given the hyperbole of apocalyptic language, John likely refers to believers here, for it seems the worship here is glad instead of grudging. What is remarkable is that the God who sits on the throne and the Lamb are placed on the same level: to both of them blessing, honor, glory, and might are ascribed. The Lamb shares the same prerogatives as God, and yet John as a Jew would be a monotheist (Deut. 6:4). John doesn't explain how the Lamb could share divine honors with the Father *forever* without compromising his monotheism, but clearly he believes they can do so, providing insight into the doctrine of the Trinity.

5:14 Upon hearing the praise of the entire creation, the four living creatures put their stamp of approval on the honor, praise, and glory being given to God and the Lamb with an "Amen." The twenty-four elders are overwhelmed with the glory and majesty of God and the Lamb and fall down and worship. No further words need be spoken. Clearly, chapters 4 and 5 inform the remainder of the book. Despite the persecution and opposition facing believers in the province of Asia, God is the mighty and sovereign Creator reigning on the throne. And Christ, the son of David, is the Lamb of God who ransomed them. The beleaguered Christians are God's kings and priests, his kingdom on the earth.

Response

The center and baseline of our faith is Jesus Christ crucified and risen (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–4). The key to history, as Revelation 5 shows, is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If Christ had not died and risen, we would still be in our sins, having no hope (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12–19). There would be no hope for redemption and no promise of new life apart from the work of the Lamb. People sometimes think Revelation is about outlandish prophecies and strange visions, but we have seen in the last two chapters that the book centers on God as Creator and Christ as Redeemer. These two truths are the foundation of our faith. We also rejoice, for we know God's plan for the world will not be frustrated. Christ with his blood has redeemed some from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. We can be assured when evangelizing every people group that God has ordained some to believe and put their trust in him. God's purpose for humans to serve as a kingdom and priests will come to pass, and his kingdom work has already begun in his people. In response, we worship God and the Lamb in song. We acknowledge that all glory, honor, praise, and power belong to God and the Lamb, and thus we fall on our faces in worship, praise, and adoration forever and ever.

REVELATION 6:1–17

6 Now I watched when the Lamb opened one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, “Come!” ²And I looked, and behold, a white horse! And its rider had a bow, and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering, and to conquer.

³When he opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, “Come!” ⁴And out came another horse, bright red. Its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that people should slay one another, and he was given a great sword.

⁵When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and behold, a black horse! And its rider had a pair of scales in his hand. ⁶And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures, saying, “A quart¹ of wheat for a denarius,² and three quarts of barley for a denarius, and do not harm the oil and wine!”

⁷When he opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” ⁸And I looked, and behold, a pale horse! And its rider’s name was Death, and Hades followed him. And they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword and with famine and with pestilence and by wild beasts of the earth.

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” ¹¹Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers³ should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

¹²When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, ¹³and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. ¹⁴The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. ¹⁵Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave⁴ and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, ¹⁶calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, ¹⁷for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

¹Greek *choenix*, a dry measure equal to about a quart ²A *denarius* was a day’s wage for a laborer ³Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters* ⁴For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface

Section Overview

In 6:1–8:5 (with an interlude in 7:1–17), John transitions from worship of God as Creator and the Lamb as Redeemer—the one worthy to open the sealed scroll—to the opening of the seven seals by the Lamb. Chapter 6 is easily structured by the opening of the first six seals; table 9.7 will make the structure easier to grasp (with the seventh seal included to complete the table).

TABLE 9.7: Revelation 6: The First Six Seals

	Image	Meaning
6:1–2 (Seal 1)	White horse	Lamb's victory
6:3–4 (Seal 2)	Red horse	War
6:5–6 (Seal 3)	Black horse	Famine
6:7–8 (Seal 4)	Pale horse	Rampant death
6:9–11 (Seal 5)	Souls of the martyrs	Cry for justice and call for patience
6:12–17 (Seal 6)	Final earthquake	Present creation comes to an end
8:1–5 (Seal 7)	Silence in heaven; leads to 7 trumpets	Further judgments

The seals are interpreted in various ways, but I understand them to include the time between Christ's resurrection and his second coming. The first four seals take place in every dimension of the earth: land, sea, rivers, and sky. The seven seals correlate well with Jesus' words about the future in Matthew 24. First, John teaches that the gospel will conquer through Christ (Rev. 6:1–2). Jesus said, "This gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Second, war will mark human history until Christ returns (Rev. 6:3–4). As Jesus said, there will be "wars and rumors of wars . . . For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom" (Matt. 24:6–7). Third, the earth will be ravaged by famines (Rev. 6:5–6). Jesus said there would be "famines and earthquakes in various places" (Matt. 24:7). Fourth, death will run rampant on the earth (Rev. 6:7–8) as part of the "beginning of the birth pains" (Matt. 24:8). Fifth, those who belong to God will be put to death for their allegiance to Christ and will not experience immediate vindication (Rev. 6:9–11). Unbelievers will turn against disciples and "deliver [them] up to tribulation and put [them] to death, and [they] will be hated by all nations for [his] name's sake" (Matt. 24:9). Sixth, history ends with the sixth seal, for the cosmos will fall apart and all will recognize that the day of God's wrath and judgment has arrived (Rev. 6:12–17). Matthew describes the end this way:

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power

and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other. (Matt. 24:29–31)

Since history concludes with the sixth seal, the seventh seal (Rev. 8:1–5) is a literary device for John to explain further the judgments unleashed on the earth before Christ returns.

The first five seals—the spread of the gospel, war, famine, death, and persecution—characterize the entire age between the first and second comings of Christ. John explains to Christians what life is like between the two advents, just as Matthew does in the eschatological discourse, so that believers won't be surprised by the sufferings and difficulties permeating this life.

Section Outline

IV. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5)

A. The First Six Seals (6:1–17)

Comment

6:1–2 The Lamb begins to break the seven seals on the scroll. When the first seal is broken, one of the four living creatures summons the first rider to come. The first four seals are correlated with four horses, echoing Zechariah 1:8–11 and 6:1–8, where four differently colored horses and four chariots with various kinds of horses patrol the earth. The first horse in Revelation 6 is a white horse, whose rider has a bow and a crown. This rider conquers as he roams the earth. Interpreters have radically different views as to what is symbolized here. Some have argued the first rider is the beast of Revelation 13, riding a white horse as a parody of Christ's riding a white horse (Rev. 19:11). The beast conquers the saints, as we see elsewhere in Revelation (11:7; 13:7). Such a reading is possible, but it is not clear that this conquering refers to persecution of the saints or that the rider is a parody. Others argue, more plausibly, that the seal represents continued wars plaguing the human race. Such an interpretation may be correct, but it seems significant that the only other rider of a white horse in Revelation is Jesus (19:11), and the next seal has to do with war. In Revelation 19 Jesus comes on the white horse to judge the wicked, but here he conquers through the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth. Such a reading fits with Jesus' prediction that the gospel would spread throughout the world before the end arrives (Matt. 24:14; 28:19; Mark 13:10). One characteristic of the present age is the proclamation of the gospel to all peoples in all places. Amid the woes and sufferings of the present age, the gospel continues to be proclaimed and to triumph throughout the world.

6:3–4 When the Lamb breaks the second seal, one of the four living creatures summons a red horse. The rider has a sword and takes peace from the earth. Armies fight and kill one another because of disagreements over land, material goods, or other matters that incite hatred. Jesus predicted there would be "wars and rumors

of wars” in this age (Matt. 24:6). He declared, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matt. 24:7). The coming of the Christ did not put an immediate end to war. Indeed, war and strife will persist until he comes again; no matter how many peace treaties are signed, war breaks out again.

6:5–6 The Lamb breaks the third seal, and a living creature again issues a summons to come. This time a black horse comes forth with scales in the hand of the rider. Food is being measured out for man, but it is woefully lacking (cf. Ezek. 4:10–11). A denarius is a day’s wages, but there is scarcely enough food if one can buy only a quart of wheat with a day’s wage or three quarts of barley for the same. The sparing of the olive oil and wine may mean that the rich continue to consume luxury items or that the famine doesn’t touch all the necessities of life. It is difficult to decide between these two, but the latter is slightly more probable, for oil and wine weren’t just luxuries. Jesus predicted that “famines” would take place before his coming (Matt. 24:7), and John reinforces that message here.

6:7–8 The Lamb breaks the fourth seal, and a living creature calls the next horse to come forth. John sees a pale green horse. The rider on this horse is Death, and Hades, standing for the realm of death, follows close behind. Death and Hades are personified as the great enemies of human existence, and hence they are virtually demonic forces. Life on earth is full of sorrow and desolation as a significant portion of the world experiences war, famine, disease, and death inflicted by wild animals (cf. Jer. 14:12; Ezek. 5:17; 29:5; 33:27). The judgment echoes Ezekiel 14:21, “How much more when I send upon Jerusalem my four disastrous acts of judgment, sword, famine, wild beasts, and pestilence, to cut off from it man and beast!” Life is marked by sorrow, death, and grief.

6:9 The opening of the fifth seal is different, for on this occasion no horse is summoned. Instead John sees the souls of those who had been martyred because of their testimony and their allegiance to the word of God. The use of the term “souls” indicates the day of resurrection hasn’t come yet. Why are the souls under the altar, and which altar is in view? The reference could be to the altar of incense (8:3, 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7; cf. Ex. 30:3) or the altar of burnt offering, where burnt offerings were sacrificed twice a day (Num. 28:1–6). The blood under the altar suggests the latter is in view (though a decision on this matter isn’t crucial), and that the death of Christians was a pleasing sacrifice to the Lord. We see a similar reality in Revelation 20:4: “I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God.” John himself was imprisoned on Patmos “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev. 1:9), and the contents of Revelation are summed up in terms of John’s witnessing the “word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2). Christians were being slain because of their commitment to the gospel of Christ, and Jesus predicted believers would be persecuted and slain before the end came (Matt. 24:9). It is also possible the language used here describes all believers. In other words, John portrays the

church as a martyr church. This is not to say all Christians are actually slain for their witness, but John portrays the church as a martyr church to emphasize the contrast between the church and the world. All believers are persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12), and some suffer to the extent of giving up their lives for Christ. John focuses on the death believers experience on account of their devotion to Jesus Christ, and the words of those under the altar reflect the longing in the hearts of all Christians.

6:10 The souls of those slain for Christ's sake have not been vindicated publicly, and the wicked have not been punished for slaughtering the righteous. Thus the martyrs under the altar call out for justice. They voice their prayer to the sovereign one, the one powerful enough to enforce justice. They voice their prayer to the one who is holy and true. Since he is holy, he cannot ultimately tolerate evil; since he is true, he is faithful to his own. The souls ask "how long" God will wait before judging and avenging the blood shed by "those who dwell on earth." In the comment on 3:10, it was noted that, in Revelation, "those who dwell on earth" always refers to unbelievers. The question of "how long?" was also raised by OT saints. "O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult?" (Ps. 94:3). And, "How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever?" (Ps. 74:10; cf. also Pss. 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; Hab. 1:2; Zech. 1:12; Luke 18:7). The issue isn't vindictiveness or raging vengeance, but justice. The prayer of the saints here is not sinful (they are dead, after all, and free from sin!) but righteous. Such a reading accords with the rest of Revelation, for John affirms the rightness of God's judgment on the wicked (Rev. 16:7; 19:2). The blood of those who love Jesus Christ has been shed. Such evil must be addressed; justice must be done (cf. Deut. 32:43; Pss. 79:10; 119:84; Luke 18:7). Otherwise, evil would reign unchecked in the universe, and God's holiness would be called into question.

6:11 God hears and answers the prayers of his people, another indication that the prayers of the martyrs are righteous. The slain martyrs are given a white robe. Those in white robes belong to God (7:9), for they have washed their robes in the Lamb's blood (7:13–14). Also, those with white garments have lived righteously (3:4–5, 18), and thus the white robe reveals that the martyrs truly belong to God. God acknowledges them as his own. The martyrs are personally assured by God that they are his, but they are also told to wait. Vindication is coming in its fullness, but not yet. There are "fellow servants," brothers and sisters who must face the same fate as those who have already lost their lives. God has appointed others to suffer for the sake of his name, and as the ruler over history he determines how many will be put to death and how long the interval shall be before judgment strikes (cf. *1 En.* 47:4; *4 Ezra* 4:35–37). The saints' cry for justice is right and good, but they must also trust God as to when the judgment of the wicked and their own vindication will occur.

6:12 The opening of the sixth seal by the Lamb is the answer to the prayer of the martyrs in 6:9–11. As the sixth seal is opened, John sees the judgment to be poured out on the wicked. He uses apocalyptic language from the OT to describe

the impending judgment, and it is clear in the context that the final judgment is described.

In the judgment scene portrayed here, the created order reels and falls apart. The end is signaled with an earthquake, a regular feature of the final judgment in Revelation (8:5; 11:13, 19; 16:18) that often signifies God's judgment in the OT as well (Jer. 10:22 LXX; Ezek. 38:19–21; Joel 3:16; Nah. 1:5). At the same time, the sun turns black and the moon turns to blood. The language isn't literal but is stock apocalyptic imagery for judgment. John picks up words from Joel: "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" (Joel 2:31). Isaiah says about Babylon's dissolution, "The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light" (Isa. 13:10). In the judgment of Egypt prophesied by Ezekiel, God "will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light" (Ezek. 32:7). Jesus uses the same language of the darkening of sun and moon in association with his coming (Matt. 24:29; cf. also Isa. 24:23; Joel 2:10; 3:15; Amos 8:9; Zeph. 1:15). Images used of God's judgment in history are now applied to the final judgment, so that the judgments in history function as a precursor to God's final judgment of the wicked.

6:13 The apocalyptic language describing the end of history and the world as we know it continues. John portrays the stars falling to the earth, just as figs fall from a tree when a powerful wind sweeps through. As is common for John, the image is picked up from Isaiah and slightly altered. Isaiah 34:4 says, "All the stars of the heaven will fall like leaves from a vine and as leaves fall from a fig tree."²² Even though the imagery is not literal, John communicates that the world is ending, for the natural order is falling apart.

6:14 The world is dissolving and breaking up before John's eyes. A massive earthquake sunders the world, the sun is black, the moon has turned to blood, and stars are flying out of the sky. And the sky itself is vanishing, being rolled up like a scroll and vanishing. Again, John draws on Isaiah 34:4, which says, "All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll." We find similar language in Hebrews 1:10–12. The language is apocalyptic and symbolic, but what do the symbols mean? If the sky is withdrawn, the world as we know it is over. The same point is made in saying the islands and mountains are moved from their locations (cf. Ezek. 26:15). The stability of the world is undermined, and the natural order necessary for life to continue is unraveling. This is further evidence that the breaking of the sixth seal represents the end of history. Just as the earthquake symbolizes the end, so too do the moving islands and mountains, as seen later in Revelation. Thus, the seventh bowl indicates the end has come, as is testified in the words "It is done!" (Rev. 16:17). When the seventh bowl is poured out, "every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found" (16:20). The fleeing islands and absent mountains testify that history is concluding. Similarly, the great white throne judgment takes

²² My translation of the LXX of Isaiah 34:4.

place at the end of history, after the beast, false prophet, and Devil are cast into the lake of fire (20:10). The final judgment begins with the words, “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them” (20:11). Here it isn’t islands and mountains that flee, but the thought is similar, for now earth and sky are gone. Life on earth has dramatically changed, for the final judgment has arrived. John testifies to the same reality in declaring that “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (21:1).

6:15 The collapse of the created order means judgment is at hand, and John draws on the “day of the LORD” theme from the prophets (e.g., Isa. 13:6, 9; Ezek. 13:5; Joel 1:15; 2:1; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Zech. 14:1) to describe the final judgment. He emphasizes that the judgment is universal: no one is spared, from kings to slaves. The emphasis is particularly on those who have power and influence—kings, generals, and the rich are included among those who will be judged (cf. Rev. 19:18; Isa. 34:12 LXX). When the judgment comes, their power, riches, or stature will be of no use. Instead, they will flee to caves and rocks in the mountains to hide. John picks up the majestic language from Isaiah 2, where Isaiah says that on the day of the Lord, “People shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth” (Isa. 2:19; cf. Isa. 2:10, 21). The day of the Lord in history forecasts the final day of the Lord, which John describes here; the historical days of the Lord anticipate the great and climactic day of the Lord. On that day the creation will disintegrate and creatures will be in panic and dread when the judgment arrives.

6:16 All the joys and advantages of life are worthless when the world reels and collapses. Human beings who have fled to the mountains and rocks for safety realize they won’t escape, so they ask the mountains and rocks to fall on them and crush them. The language of judgment alludes to the judgment predicted for Israel in Hosea 10:8: “They shall say to the mountains, ‘Cover us,’ and to the hills, ‘Fall on us.’” Jesus also picks up the language of Hosea when predicting the final judgment (Luke 23:30), another example of Hosea’s prediction of judgment in history functioning as prelude and anticipation of the final judgment. People long for death in mountains and rocks because they fear facing God, who reigns on the throne, and the wrath of the Lamb. The prospect of standing before God and the Lamb is so dreadful that death is preferable.

Three other elements of the verse stand out. First, God and the Lamb are placed on the same level; they play an equal role in the final judgment—another indication the Lamb has the same identity and nature as God. Second, John speaks in a most striking way of the wrath of the Lamb. We don’t think of lambs as full of wrath, but this Lamb is a different kind of lamb! Third, it is common to hear people say that the God of the NT is different from the God of the OT, but such an assertion is false. In both Testaments God is angry at sin and judges those who despise his name and indulge in evil. Grace and judgment are present in both the OT and the NT.

6:17 Now the reason for the terror of human beings is explained further. As the present creation falls apart, people implore rocks and mountains to destroy them, that they might avoid God on the throne and the wrath of the Lamb, because the “great day of their wrath has come.” It is interesting to note that verse 16 spoke of the Lamb’s wrath, but now we are told that God on the throne and the Lamb are both wrathful. Indeed, it is the “great day” of their wrath. The OT prophets often spoke of the day of the Lord, emphasizing it was a day of judgment (Isa. 2:12; 22:12; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 2:1, 31; 3:14; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5), though it was also the day the Lord would deliver his people (e.g., Isa. 4:2; 11:11; 19:16, 18, 19; 27:12–13; Joel 3:18; Zech. 13:2). The focus here is on judgment, and the OT prophets say it is a day of “destruction” (Isa. 13:6; Joel 1:15), “darkness” and “gloom” (Amos 5:18, 20), and “wrath and fierce anger” (Isa. 13:9; cf. Zeph. 1:18; 2:2, 3), when the kings on earth will be punished (Isa. 24:21). The day of the Lord in the OT often refers to days in history when God judged his people or their enemies, but these days of the Lord point to and culminate in the final day of the Lord—what John calls the “great day” of the Lord.

OT writers reflected on the day of God’s anger, asking who could “endure” the day of his “great” and “awesome” anger (Joel 2:31). “Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?” (Mal. 3:2; cf. Ps. 76:7; Luke 21:36). John asks a similar question here. When the end arrives and the wrath of God and the Lamb are about to be unleashed, who can withstand their wrath? John will answer that question in the next chapter.

Response

Jesus has come and brought salvation, so what should we as Christians expect in our life on earth? Will life be radically different now that the Messiah has come to defeat the Devil and forgive our sins? John disabuses us of any notion of heaven on earth. Yes, the gospel will be proclaimed to the ends of the earth, Christ will triumph throughout the world, and every tribe and tongue will be reached with the message that liberates and frees from sin. Still, the gospel will spread amid fierce opposition, and believers will be slain for their allegiance to Jesus. Our vindication won’t come during this present evil age. War and strife, famine and hunger, disease and pestilence will characterize life on earth. Life on earth is significant, and what we do matters (the gospel reaches the ends of the earth through us!). We won’t create heaven on earth, yet we should still work for justice and peace during the present evil age. There is no room, however, for utopian visions, as anyone who studies the last two thousand years of history surely knows. Believers are not promised health and wealth in the present age but suffering, persecution, and even martyrdom. Soon, however, the day of judgment will come and God and the Lamb will pour out their wrath on the wicked. The question of “how long?” won’t persist forever. A day of reckoning is coming, a day when the wicked will be punished and the righteous will be vindicated forever.

REVELATION 7:1–8

7 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. ²Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, ³saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” ⁴And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

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

Section Overview

Chapter 6 concluded with the final judgment, asking who can withstand God’s wrath on the final day. Chapter 7 functions as an interlude and answers the question posed in chapter 6: those sealed by God will be spared from wrath. They are the ones, as 7:9 says, who *stand* before God’s throne. The four angels hold back, for now, the four winds of judgment that will bring about the dissolution of this present world (Rev. 7:1; cf. 6:12–14). Another angel arises with the seal of God, saying that the earth, sea, and trees must not be harmed until God’s servants are sealed (7:2–3). The seal will protect God’s servants from wrath at the final judgment, and God’s servants will be authenticated as his own. Verses 4–8 record the number of those sealed: the total is 144,000, with 12,000 sealed from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The identity of the 144,000 is contested, but I will argue that they represent the church of Jesus Christ, the people of God. We can summarize the passage this way: Who will be protected from the wrath of God and the wrath of the Lamb? Those who are sealed and protected by God, i.e., the 144,000, the true Israel, the church of Jesus Christ.

Section Outline

- IV. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5) . . .
 - B. Interlude (7:1–17)
 - 1. Sealing of the 144,000 (7:1–8)

Comment

7:1 The previous text (6:12–17) concludes with a query: Who can withstand the wrath of God and the wrath of the Lamb? John answers that question in these verses. The “four corners” of the earth aren’t intended to teach that the world is flat. Instead, the four corners stand for the entire world (cf. Isa. 11:12; Rev. 20:8), just as “four corners” of a house stand for the entire house (Job 1:19), and “four corners of the land” stand for the entire land of Israel (Ezek. 7:2). The four angels, then, superintend the world for God’s sake. The “four winds” stand for the judgment to come, the final judgment, which will engulf the entire world. We see precedent for this in the OT (cf. also Ezek. 5:10, 12) where “four winds from the four quarters of heaven” will be inflicted on the entire land of Elam (Jer. 49:36; cf. Ezek. 37:9; Dan. 7:2; 8:8; 11:4; Zech. 2:6; 6:5; Matt. 24:31; Mark 13:27), but here the four winds encompass the whole world. Elsewhere in Scripture, a close relationship is forged between angels and winds that strike the world (Ps. 104:4). Here the angels are restraining the winds so that they are not unleashed on land, sea, or trees. John takes us back to the period before the final judgment commences.

7:2–3 Another angel appears with the seal of the living God, commanding the four angels about to harm the earth and sea—i.e., the angels about to bring final judgment on the world—to refrain from doing any harm until God’s servants are sealed on their foreheads. The sealing on the forehead isn’t literal but symbolizes protection granted to those who belong to God (cf. 9:4). So now we know who can endure the wrath of God—those with God’s seal upon them. John again draws upon the OT. In Ezekiel 9, Jerusalem is about to be judged by executioners because of its evil. Those who are wicked will be annihilated, but a “mark” is put “on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it” (Ezek. 9:4). The judgment will not spare the young or old, but those with the mark will remain untouched (Ezek. 9:6). Those who are sealed by God on the forehead in Revelation stand in contrast to those who accept the mark of the beast on their foreheads (Rev. 13:6; 14:9; 20:4). In both instances the mark is symbolic. What separates believers from unbelievers is that the former have God’s seal and the “Father’s name written on their foreheads” (14:1; cf. 22:4). They are protected by God and marked out as his own people, his genuine servants.

7:4–8 Those who are sealed are now identified. John *hears* the number. They are 144,000 from every tribe of Israel. John then lists 12,000 from each tribe. God numbers, knows, and cares for his own; he knows each of his sheep by name (John 10:3). The list of tribes doesn’t match any rendition of the tribes in the OT. Judah

may be first since Jesus the Messiah, head of the people of God, comes from Judah. What is also striking is that Dan is omitted, perhaps because of the evil associated with that tribe (Judges 18). Instead we have Joseph and Manasseh. This is curious, as Manasseh descended from Joseph, and thus we would expect Ephraim and Manasseh. These peculiarities in the listing suggest a symbolic reading.

Scholars differ on identifying the 144,000. Some say the number is literal and records Jews from each tribe who become believers in Jesus Christ. Dispensational interpreters think the number refers to Jews who are saved during the final seven-year tribulation period.

It is more convincing to say the 144,000 symbolically represent all Christians throughout history, both Jews and Gentiles. They are God's army who wage war by being faithful to the Lamb and enduring persecution. The reasons for thinking John refers to all Christians are numerous, and some stem from Revelation 14, where the 144,000 appear again. First, numbers in apocalyptic literature are regularly symbolic. Here we have the number twelve representing the people of God from the twelve tribes in the OT, and the number is squared and then multiplied by 1,000. Hence the number should be understood as a symbolic way of designating the entire people of God.

Second, John follows a pattern we saw in chapter 5. He is *told* about a Lion (5:5), but he *sees* a Lamb (5:6), and the Lion and the Lamb are the same entity. So too here, John *hears* the number 144,000 (7:4), but he *sees* an uncountable multitude (7:9). Again we have two different ways of describing the same entity, and the uncountable multitude buttresses the point that the 144,000 represent all believers.

Third, specifying 144,000 from Israel doesn't necessarily mean they are Jews. John has already said twice that the Jews are a synagogue of Satan (2:9; 3:9), and the roles between unbelieving Jews and Christians have been reversed, so that now unbelieving Jews play the role of Gentiles in the OT; they will bow before Christians to acknowledge them as the loved ones, the elect ones of the Lord (3:9; cf. Deut. 7:7–8; Isa. 41:8).

Fourth, a practical problem arises if the reference is to 12,000 from each tribe of Israel. Virtually no Jews today know from what tribe they descend, nor is it clear that most knew their genealogical ancestry in John's day. If someone were to say that God knows the tribes and apportions exactly 12,000 from each tribe, it is difficult to see how such a statement would be meaningful, for no one on earth could know that the 12,000 are from each of the twelve tribes specified.

Fifth, in 14:3 the 144,000 are described as those "redeemed from the earth" and in 14:4 as having been "redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb." The redeemed are most naturally interpreted to refer to *all* the redeemed, both Jews and Gentiles.

Sixth, John says they are "virgins" who have "not defiled themselves with women" (14:4). But surely this language is symbolic, for being a virgin is not more pleasing to God than marriage, and it is false teachers who say sexual rela-

tions within marriage are defiling (1 Tim. 4:1–3). John (cf. comment on Rev. 14:4) reaches back to the OT, which often warns Israel against spiritual prostitution. To be devoted to God is to be a “pure virgin” devoted “to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). For all these reasons, then, we have good grounds for thinking the number 144,000 is laden with imagery and symbolism, referring to the entire people of God.

Response

Who will escape the wrath of God at the final judgment? Only those who belong to God, those who are sealed by him, who are numbered by him. If we are sealed by God, we are protected and authenticated by him. At the same time, those of us who are sealed by God are the true and new Israel, the chosen and loved people of the Lord. We too deserve the wrath of God but have been spared by his grace and mercy, which should lead to thankfulness and heartfelt praise. How wonderful it is to be counted among his flock, to be the army of the Lord—an army that preaches peace and love through the slain and risen Lamb!

REVELATION 7:9–17

⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” ¹⁴ I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ “Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Section Overview

John now turns to *see* what he has just *heard* (Rev. 7:4)—not 144,000, but an uncountable multitude of believers, showing that the 144,000 symbolizes the entire people of God. This uncountable multitude is before God’s throne and the Lamb, wearing white robes and carrying palm branches (v. 9). In other words, they are in heaven with God, showing that those sealed by God are rewarded with eternal life. These believers give praise to God and the Lamb for their salvation (v. 10), and the angelic multitudes also give praise and honor to God for his goodness and glory (vv. 11–12). The narrative then steps back to clarify for readers exactly what is occurring. An angel asks John the identity of those in white robes and where they have come from (v. 13). John acknowledges he doesn’t know, and that the angel must inform him (v. 14). The angel reveals to John that they have come “out of the great tribulation,” and that their robes have been whitened by the blood of the Lamb. Thus, the reason they are before God’s throne, the reason they are in the heavenly temple, is that they have been redeemed by the Lamb’s blood (v. 15). Their earthly lives are completed, for in verses 15–17 John previews the new creation elaborated in 21:1–22:5. There is no more hunger, thirst, or pain for this uncountable multitude, those sealed by God (7:16). The Lamb is their shepherd and has guided them to springs of living water and wiped every tear from their eyes (v. 17). Chapter 7 tells us who will survive the wrath of God and the Lamb (6:17): it is those who are sealed by God, those whose robes have been made white by the blood of the Lamb—and they will enjoy God’s presence in the new creation forever.

Section Outline

IV. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5) . . .

B. Interlude (7:1–17) . . .

2. Salvation of an Uncountable Multitude (7:9–17)

Comment

7:9 “After this” refers to John’s next vision and does not designate an event subsequent to the sealing of the 144,000. John *heard* the number 144,000 but *sees* an innumerable multitude, showing that the 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel symbolize the people of God from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. This is the same pattern as in chapter 5, where John is *told* about a Lion but *sees* a Lamb—the Lion and Lamb having the same referent. So too here, the 144,000 and the uncountable multitude are the same entity, portrayed from two different perspectives. Here we see fulfilled the promise given to Abraham that all nations would be blessed (e.g., Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8, 16). Those from every people group and tribe stand before God’s throne and before the Lamb. They can stand in God’s presence because of their white robes, showing they are righteous and clean before God and have won the victory (cf. comment on Rev. 7:13–14). John has answered, then, the question posed in 6:17 of who can “stand” in the light of God’s coming wrath: the 144,000 sealed by God. That is, the innumerable multi-

tude with palm branches in their hands, signifying joy and praise in triumph, as when many took palm branches to celebrate Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and greeted him with cries of "Hosanna" (cf. John 12:13). We see the same theme in *2 Maccabees* 10:7—"Bearing ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to him who had given success to the purifying of his own Holy Place"²³ (cf. *1 Macc.* 13:51; *Jub.* 16:31). The multitude isn't standing before God and the Lamb with fear of judgment (cf. Rev. 6:16–17) but with great joy.

7:10 The multitude cries out with praise, ascribing their salvation, their deliverance from God's wrath, to God and the Lamb. The multitude doesn't deserve praise and honor for escaping God's wrath. All praise goes to God and the Lamb for their salvation. The Scriptures teach repeatedly that salvation is God's work, that he is the one who delivers his people (e.g., Pss. 3:8; 37:39; 62:7; Isa. 43:11; Jer. 3:23; Hos. 13:4; Jonah 2:9; Rev. 19:1). In addition, we see once again the Lamb and God sharing the same stature, for salvation is ascribed both to God and to the Lamb.

7:11–12 The salvation of some from every people group fills the angels around the throne with praise. The angels, elders, and four living creatures are placed together here, further evidence that the elders are angelic, distinguished from human beings and performing the same function as other angelic beings. The greatness of what God has done fills the angels with awe, and they fall on their faces to worship God (cf. 4:10; 5:8, 14; 11:16; 19:4). Their worship is expressed in words of delight, saying "Amen" to the salvation of the innumerable multitude. Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, and power are ascribed to God forever and punctuated with an "Amen." God, of course, is already blessed, glorious, wise, powerful, and worthy of all thanksgiving and honor (cf. 4:9, 11; 5:13; 19:1). Thus, the angels don't give God anything he doesn't already possess intrinsically. Still, they ascribe to God all these qualities, recognizing they belong properly to him (cf. 1 Chron. 29:10–11).

7:13–14 The narrative moves in a new direction, and the elder's (i.e., the angel's) question provokes the reader to take notice of the answer's significance. The question-answer format calls attention to the situation in a fresh way (cf. Ezek. 37:3) and functions as an effective literary device. The angel/elder asks John to identify those in white robes and explain where they came from. John's answer ("Sir, you know.") reveals implicitly John's ignorance and highlights the wisdom of the angel, who is able to disclose the true state of affairs. The elder explains that John is seeing those who have come "out of the great tribulation." The phrase "great tribulation" isn't a technical term with a single meaning. In Matthew it denotes the days when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Romans (Matt. 24:21). But the phrase also designates the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ. Daniel describes this period as a "time of trouble" from which God's people will be delivered (Dan. 12:1; cf. Jer. 30:7). It is probable that John sees the entire

23 *The English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

period before Christ's return as a time of trouble and great tribulation. In other words, the term isn't limited to a seven-year period at the end of history, for we have no clear teaching anywhere of such a distinct period before the conclusion of history. John, like Daniel, teaches that those who belong to God are rescued. They are rescued and delivered because they have washed their robes white in the Lamb's blood, picturing the cleansing work of Christ on the cross (cf. Rev. 1:5; 12:11). The robes of the redeemed are white, not on account of their inherent righteousness but because of the cleansing atonement of the Lamb who gave himself for their sins (cf. comment on 5:6). Often in Revelation white robes and garments designate the righteousness of the saints, the godly lives they have lived (3:4, 5; 6:11; 7:9). John gives us here the ultimate reason why believers have white robes and explains why they have endured the great tribulation. Their salvation is due to the blood of the Lamb, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the cleansing coming only from him.

7:15 “Therefore” ties the text to what precedes: those who have endured the great tribulation and have had their robes whitened by the Lamb's blood are now before God's throne (cf. 7:9). To be before God's throne means being in heaven, or, perhaps better, in the new creation. The language here is symbolic of eternal life in the new creation. This innumerable crowd is akin to priests serving God constantly, day and night, in his temple. Worshiping God at his throne characterizes the new creation (22:3). The reference to the temple is clearly symbolic, for in the new creation there is no temple, but the temple is God and the Lamb (21:22). God personally dwells with his people, as the entire world is his temple (21:3). The tabernacle/temple imagery continues, for God who sits on the throne will shelter (*skēnōsei*; lit., “tabernacle over”) his people, protecting them from harm. In the new creation, nothing can touch them (cf. Isa. 4:5); the days of suffering are over.

7:16 The nature of God's protection and dwelling with his people is expanded upon, and it is even more evident that life in the new creation, life after the resurrection, is pictured here. The days of hunger and thirst have ended. No longer will believers face the intense heat of the sun, where no relief can be found, for the time of bodily suffering and privation has ended. Now they are under God's protection, and everything is provided for them in his temple, the new creation he indwells (cf. Lev. 26:11; Ezek. 37:27). The second exodus from Babylon is described in similar terms in Isaiah 49:10: “They shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.” What God promised in the second exodus is fulfilled in a final and ultimate manner in the new creation for the true Israel—the church of Jesus Christ. In Isaiah, God promises Israel he will satisfy their needs as they travel through the desert; but in Revelation, what God did in the wilderness is magnified. He will protect his people from harm forever and ever.

7:17 Every need of those before God's throne is met by the Lamb, their shepherd. Revelation is full of striking images, but this is surely one of the most striking.

Lambs aren't shepherds; they are sheep. Still, this Lamb is also the shepherd of his people. The psalmist says the Lord is his shepherd (Ps. 23:1), and identifying the Lamb as a shepherd constitutes further evidence of the divinity of Jesus, as he is the shepherd of God's people just as the Father is the shepherd of Israel. The picture of Jesus as the shepherd of the sheep also finds its roots in John's Gospel, where Jesus identifies himself as the good shepherd (John 10:2, 11, 14, 16; cf. also Matt. 2:6; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 5:4). Jesus' role as a shepherd also fulfills OT expectations, for the Davidic king was shepherd and ruler of his people (2 Sam. 5:2). John especially draws here on Ezekiel 34:23. There God promises to establish a "shepherd, my servant David" to "feed" and "shepherd" his people (cf. also Zech. 11:4, 7, 9, 15; 13:7). The Lamb as the shepherd of his people will lead them to refreshing water, just as the Lord leads his people "beside still waters" (Ps. 23:2). With living water Jesus slakes the thirst of those who belong to him (John 4:14; 7:37–38; cf. Jer. 17:13)—those who belong to Jesus "drink from the river of your delights" (Ps. 36:8; cf. Rev. 22:1). Finally, God will wipe all tears from their eyes. It is quite clear the new creation is in view here, for we find the same promise in Revelation 21:4 (cf. Isa. 25:8). Those whom God seals and protects will delight in the Lamb and in God forever. Every joy will be theirs, and the sorrow of the present evil age will be only a memory.

Response

Praise God there will be a countless multitude in the new creation; salvation isn't limited to a few but includes more than can be calculated, enjoying the lavish greatness of God's grace. The fulcrum of history, the key to history, is the cross of Christ. Believers enter the new creation because the blood of the Lamb was shed for our sake. The stain of guilt is removed by his atoning sacrifice. Seeing the grace and beauty of this great salvation causes both saints and angels to swell with praise and joy. The sorrows and troubles of this present world won't last forever. The day is coming when the entire universe will be God's temple, and he will wipe away our tears. The Lamb will be our shepherd, satisfying every need and filling us with unspeakable joy.

REVELATION 8:1–5

8 When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. ²Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. ³And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, ⁴and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. ⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings,¹ flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

¹Or *voices*, or *sounds*

Section Overview

The opening of the seventh seal seems superfluous, since final judgment came with the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12–17), but this seal, a literary device leading to the seven trumpets, recapitulates, rehearses, and expands upon the coming judgments. The silence in heaven for about thirty minutes suggests that judgment is about to fall (8:1), and the short time period indicates judgment will be sudden. Seven angels are given seven trumpets (v. 2), and another angel stands at the golden altar of incense to offer incense along with the prayers of the saints before the throne (v. 3). The prayers and incense rise before God (v. 4), and the angel takes fire from the altar of incense and casts it to the earth (v. 5). The result is thunder, lightning, and an earthquake. The passage clearly teaches that the judgment of the seven trumpets is an answer to the prayers of the saints (cf. 6:9–11). God judges those who stubbornly resist his will, and their failure to repent demonstrates that they deserve judgment.

Section Outline

IV. The Seven Seals (6:1–8:5) . . .

C. The Seventh Seal and the Seven Trumpets (8:1–5)

Comment

8:1 John has explained in 7:1–17 that those who are sealed by God will escape his wrath. Now he returns to the opening of the seals, and the Lamb opens the seventh seal. A seventh seal seems unnecessary, since the sixth seal led to final judgment and the end of history. The breaking of the seventh seal, however, leads to the blowing of seven trumpets. The trumpets don't describe a new series of events but revisit, from a different perspective, the same period of time found in the first six

seals. Revelation, like many texts in the OT, is recursive, revisiting the same period of time from a complementary perspective. When the Lamb opens the seventh seal, there is silence in heaven for about half an hour. What is the significance of the silence? In the OT we see silence before God acts in judgment (Hab. 2:20; Zeph. 1:7; cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 18:14–15). It is the kind of eerie silence we feel in the natural world before a tornado suddenly strikes.

8:2 John sees seven angels standing in God's presence (cf. *Tob.* 12:15; *1 En.* 90:21; *3 En.* 17:1). Seven angels are mentioned quite often in Revelation (Rev. 8:6; 15:1, 6, 7, 8; 16:1; 17:1; 21:9), and as God's servants they execute his will. The angels are given seven trumpets; when these trumpets are blown, the trumpet judgments will be inflicted on the earth (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19). The blowing of trumpets is often a call to war and judgment in the OT (Num. 10:9; Josh. 6:4–6, 20; Judg. 7:22; Jer. 4:19; 6:1; Ezek. 33:3–6; Hos. 5:8; Joel 2:1; Amos 3:6; Zeph. 1:16; cf. Matt. 24:31), and here the trumpets signify God's judgment, just as the trumpets blown at Jericho heralded the fall of that city (Joshua 6). The opening of the seventh seal before the trumpet judgments doesn't prove that the trumpets are subsequent to the seals, for we saw that the sixth seal was the final judgment. More likely, this is a literary device to continue the narrative.

8:3–4 Another angel appears with a golden censer and stands at the altar of incense (cf. Rev. 14:18; Amos 9:1). The angel plays a role in bringing the prayers of the saints before God (cf. *1 En.* 9:3; 15:2; 99:3). The altar of incense was in the Holy Place in the OT tabernacle/temple (Ex. 30:1–10; 37:25–29; 40:5). On the Day of Atonement a censer of incense was brought inside the veil, and the incense cloud covered the mercy seat to avoid judgment (Lev. 16:12–13). John informs us that the incense here is offered with the prayers of the saints on the altar before God's throne. Some understand this to say that the prayers of the saints are defiled without incense being added to them. It seems more plausible to say that the incense *is* the prayers—they are acceptable to God, just as incense was pleasing to him. The OT usage supports this notion, for Psalm 141:2 says, “Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice!” The prayers of the saints and incense are put in a censer and offered to God.

8:5 In response to the prayers of believers, the angel takes the censer from the altar of incense, fills it with fire from the altar, and throws it on the earth. The imagery is apocalyptic, of course, as there is no literal altar of incense involved. The fire the angel flings represents God's judgment of the wicked. We see a similar judgment scene in Ezekiel, where the man in linen is instructed, “Go in among the whirling wheels underneath the cherubim. Fill your hands with burning coals from between the cherubim, and scatter them over the city” (Ezek. 10:2). Here too in Revelation, the judgments poured out in the trumpets represent answers to the prayers of the saints. Their prayers for God's kingdom to come and his will to be done are being answered (Matt. 6:10). The coming judgments, as a result of the

prayers of the saints, are previewed with a massive thunderstorm and earthquake (cf. Isa. 29:6). In Revelation, a thunderstorm and earthquake regularly signal that the final judgment is coming (cf. 6:12; 11:13, 19; 16:18), and show that the judgment comes from God's throne (4:5). (Cf. comment on 6:12.)

Response

It may often seem that our prayers are not being answered—that they are offered in vain. But Revelation assures us that God hears the prayers of the saints. All through history, God's people have prayed for his kingdom to come and his will to be done. Every prayer for the coming kingdom will certainly be answered. The prayers for justice voiced by martyrs are not ignored (cf. 6:9–11). Justice will be realized, the new creation will arrive, and the wicked will be judged. Our prayers make a difference; they are one of the means God has ordained to accomplish his purposes. We must not lose heart or ever think our prayers for goodness to prevail are ignored. Instead, we must continue to pray to our wise and sovereign God. Our prayers will be answered—at just the right time.

REVELATION 8:6–13

⁶Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

⁷The first angel blew his trumpet, and there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, and these were thrown upon the earth. And a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up, and all green grass was burned up.

⁸The second angel blew his trumpet, and something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea, and a third of the sea became blood. ⁹A third of the living creatures in the sea died, and a third of the ships were destroyed.

¹⁰The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. ¹¹The name of the star is Wormwood.¹ A third of the waters became wormwood, and many people died from the water, because it had been made bitter.

¹²The fourth angel blew his trumpet, and a third of the sun was struck, and a third of the moon, and a third of the stars, so that a third of their light might be darkened, and a third of the day might be kept from shining, and likewise a third of the night.

¹³Then I looked, and I heard an eagle crying with a loud voice as it flew directly overhead, "Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth, at the blasts of the other trumpets that the three angels are about to blow!"

¹ *Wormwood* is the name of a plant and of the bitter-tasting extract derived from it

Section Overview

The seven angels begin to blow the seven trumpets (Rev. 8:6), and the text is nicely structured by the sequence of the trumpets, as seen in table 9.8.

TABLE 9.8: The Seven Trumpets

Trumpet 1	Earth	8:7	Hail, fire, and blood on land
Trumpet 2	Sea	8:8–9	Burning mountain thrown into the sea
Trumpet 3	Rivers and springs	8:10–11	Burning star falls on rivers and springs
Trumpet 4	Sky	8:12	Sun, moon, and stars darkened
<i>Interlude</i>		8:13	
Trumpet 5	First woe	9:1–12	Demons from the abyss
Trumpet 6	Second woe	9:13–21	Demons from the east
<i>Interlude</i>		10:1–11:14	
Trumpet 7	Third woe	11:15–19	Kingdom come

There is an interlude between the first four trumpets and the last three; the last three trumpets are introduced with a threefold woe warning unbelievers of the horror of the last three trumpets (8:13). John prepares us, then, for the terrors eventuating with the last three trumpets. When do the trumpet judgments occur? Some restrict them to a seven-year tribulation in the end times, but there is no clear evidence in Scripture for such a seven-year period before the end arrives. It is preferable to locate the trumpets in the period between Christ's resurrection and return. The trumpets and seals overlap, so that the trumpet judgments represent a recursive retelling, from a different perspective, of the time period of the seals. In chapter 8, the first four trumpets communicate God's judgment on land, sea, rivers, and the skies; every realm of life is touched by human sin. Thus the descriptions should not be interpreted literally; instead we have a vivid and exaggerated picture of devastating judgments encompassing the entire world. The judgments striking earth during this present evil age are designed to bring people to repentance, and the failure to repent (9:20–21) demonstrates that the judgments are just.

Section Outline

V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19)

A. The First Four Trumpets: Cosmic Destruction (8:6–13)

Comment

8:6–7 As a result of the prayers of the saints, the seven angels begin to blow their trumpets, signaling that God is about to judge his enemies. Some of the trumpet judgments echo the plagues poured out on Egypt. The first trumpet reminds us of the plague of hail (cf. Ex. 9:23–24). The fire accompanying it probably refers to lightning strikes, so that the picture is of a massive storm with hail and lightning

(Ps. 18:13; Ezek. 38:22; *Sir.* 39:29). John signals that the language is symbolic and apocalyptic, for the lightning is mixed with blood (cf. Joel 2:30). This is not an ordinary lightning storm! In its wake, one-third of the earth and its trees are burned up (cf. Ezek. 5:2, 12) and green grass vanishes. If the language is literal, what is described must be future, for such a devastating judgment has not yet taken place. It is more plausible, however, to posit that John is describing with apocalyptic language the devastation marking life on earth during this present evil age. The desolations impacting the earth represent God's judgment. The apocalyptic and exaggerated nature of the imagery is confirmed by Revelation 9:4, for the locusts are told not to harm the grass on earth, but this makes little sense if all the grass is already burned up! The message communicated is that living in this world has many benefits (two-thirds of the world is unaffected), but God's judgments strike the world on account of sin.

8:8–9 The trumpet of the second angel sounds, and a great mountain burning like fire is thrown into the sea (cf. *1 En.* 18:13; 21:3), picturing a volcanic eruption. We are reminded of how Babylon will be reduced by God to a "burnt mountain" (Jer. 51:25). Once again, the judgment is scarcely literal. The first trumpet describes the effect of God's judgment on the earth, and here we see its effect on the seas and oceans. One-third of the sea turns to blood, just as the Nile turned to blood during the days of Moses (Ex. 7:20). The Nile turned to blood literally, but John takes this image and uses it apocalyptically to describe the effect on the seas and oceans. He says one-third of the creatures in the sea died and one-third of the boats were destroyed. The number one-third isn't exact; the point is that God's judgment is poured out on a world resisting him.

8:10–11 With the third trumpet sounded by the third angel, a star falls from heaven, burning with fire (cf. 9:1; Isa. 14:12; *1 En.* 86:1). The burning star falls on rivers and springs and embitters them. One-third of the water is polluted, and many die upon drinking it. We see a similar judgment in Jeremiah: "I will feed this people with bitter food, and give them poisonous water to drink" (Jer. 9:15). Again, we should not interpret this literally; the poisoning of the waters signals the devastation poured out on the earth. The waters of the earth should be refreshing and invigorating, but life on earth is polluted because of human sin. God's judgments affect life on land, oceans, and seas, and they also strike the water human beings need to live.

8:12 When the fourth angel blows his trumpet, the sun is darkened for one-third of the day and the moon and stars for one-third of the night. It is hard to imagine what these words could mean if they were interpreted literally, for life on earth wouldn't continue if the sun didn't shine for one-third of every day. We are reminded of the plague of darkness that engulfed Egypt (Ex. 10:21–23). Similarly, Isaiah describes the "day of the LORD" as a time when the stars do not shine and the sun and moon yield no light: "The stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not

shed its light” (Isa. 13:10; cf. Ezek. 32:7; Joel 2:31; 3:15). The celestial phenomena predicted at the coming of the day of Lord in the prophets did not take place literally. The language is used to depict God’s judgment on nations in history. Jesus also says that the same kinds of things will accompany his future coming (Matt. 24:29; Mark 13:24; Luke 21:25). The four trumpets speak of God’s judgment on land, sea, rivers, and the skies. All of life in this present age is affected by human sin, and the temporal judgments of God in history point to and anticipate the final judgment.

8:13 Verse 13 functions as a literary device to highlight that the judgments of the last three trumpets will be worse than the first four. A flying eagle anticipates and heralds the three trumpets to come with a threefold woe (cf. Jer. 4:13; Hos. 8:1), warning of impending desolation and devastation. The desolation and devastation is limited, however, to those who dwell on earth. As we saw in Revelation 3:10, “earth dwellers” in Revelation always represent unbelievers. Those who believe in Jesus Christ have no reason to fear the last three trumpet judgments, but unbelievers should be filled with dread.

Response

God rules over the world, despite resistance to his reign and rule (cf. Ps. 103:19). His rule manifests itself in judgment and salvation—here we see his judgments over a world in rebellion against him. God’s judgments touch every sphere of the world, including land, sea, rivers, and skies. The world is disfigured and distorted, showing that it is neither what it should be nor what it will be. God’s judgment isn’t irrational, for we saw previously that it falls in answer to the prayers of the saints (Rev. 8:1–5) in response to the rebellion of human beings against God. So, God’s judgments are one way he restores order and justice and harmony to a world gone wrong—it is one stage along the pathway by which shalom will be reestablished in the world.

REVELATION 9:1–12

9 And the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star fallen from heaven to earth, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit.¹ ²He opened the shaft of the bottomless pit, and from the shaft rose smoke like the smoke of a great furnace, and the sun and the air were darkened with the smoke from the shaft. ³Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth. ⁴They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green plant or any tree, but only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. ⁵They were allowed to torment them for five months,

but not to kill them, and their torment was like the torment of a scorpion when it stings someone. ⁶ And in those days people will seek death and will not find it. They will long to die, but death will flee from them.

⁷ In appearance the locusts were like horses prepared for battle: on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, ⁸ their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; ⁹ they had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle. ¹⁰ They have tails and stings like scorpions, and their power to hurt people for five months is in their tails. ¹¹ They have as king over them the angel of the bottomless pit. His name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek he is called Apollyon.²

¹² The first woe has passed; behold, two woes are still to come.

¹ Greek *the abyss*; also verses 2, 11 ² *Abaddon* means *destruction*; *Apollyon* means *destroyer*

Section Overview

The blowing of the fifth trumpet introduces us to more strange and apocalyptic imagery, difficult to interpret. The passage describes the unleashing of a demonic horde upon the earth to torment and afflict human beings. The star that fell from heaven to earth is probably a good angel, granted authority over the abyss (Rev. 9:1). The angel opens the abyss, and the world is darkened by the smoke rising from it (v. 2). Locusts, which are probably demons, appear on earth out of the smoke and have power like scorpions (v. 3). We see from verse 4 that these are not ordinary locusts, for they have no interest in grass, green plants, or trees. Instead, they seek those who do not have God's seal on their foreheads (v. 4). These locust-like creatures torment those who do not have God's seal, stinging them with the sting of a scorpion (v. 5). The torment will be so great that people will long to die yet will continue living (v. 6). The appearance of the locusts is then described: they are like horses prepared for battle, but with human faces (v. 7). Their hair is like women's, and their teeth like lions' (v. 8). They have iron breastplates, and the sound of their wings is like chariots preparing for war (v. 9). Most of the language here is taken from Joel's description of the day of the Lord, showing that these "locusts" are agents of judgment. Their tails sting like scorpions, and they inflict misery on unbelievers for five months (v. 10). Their king is the "angel of the abyss." He is identified as "Apollyon," which means "destroyer," and he is probably Satan (v. 11). John then informs the reader that two woes remain (v. 12).

Section Outline

V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19) . . .

B. Fifth Trumpet: Demonic Locust Plague (9:1–12)

Comment

9:1 When the fifth angel blew his trumpet, John saw a star fall from heaven to earth. The star probably represents an angel (cf. Judg. 5:20; Job 38:7), and some

identify it as Satan or another evil angel. Such an interpretation is attractive, but elsewhere in Revelation it is always good angels who do God's bidding, and hence the evidence for it being a satanic or evil angel is not convincing. It seems a bit more likely that a good angel is in view here, but certainty is impossible. The angel was granted the key to open the "bottomless pit." We recognize again that the language is symbolic, for demons aren't literally confined in a pit under the earth. The same language is used of the place of origin for the beast (Rev. 11:7; 17:8), and Satan is thrown into the abyss for a thousand years (20:3). The "key" grants the angel authority and rule over those in the pit (cf. 20:1), implying that the angel's authority is granted him by God. This reading is confirmed by the words "he was given" (*edothē*). Whenever the clause "it was given" or "he was given" (or an equivalent phrase) appears in Revelation, God is the implied subject of the passive verb (6:2, 4, 8, 11; 7:2; 8:3; 9:3, 5; 11:1, 2; 13:5, 7, 14, 15; 16:8; 19:8; 20:4).

9:2 When the angel opens the shaft of the abyss, smoke billows forth as from a gigantic furnace. The sun and air are both darkened by the smoke spreading over the world, representing judgment (cf. Gen. 19:28; Isa. 34:10). In Joel, the sky is darkened by a locust horde (Joel 2:10), and here we find God's judgment diffused throughout the world.

9:3 As John peers through the smoke, locusts emerge on the earth. Locusts represent judgment and were one of the plagues the Lord poured out on Egypt (Ex. 10:4). We actually have the singular "it was given" (*edothē*) to denote again that the authority granted to the locusts is finally from God, even if Satan is an intermediary agent. The biblical portrait of evil is complex, for God rules over evil without being morally blameworthy, while Satan is counted guilty for his motives and actions. The authority of the locusts is compared to the authority of scorpions. We have an important hint here that these locusts aren't ordinary locusts, for scorpions are associated with the demonic elsewhere in Scripture and Jewish writings (Luke 10:19; cf. Deut. 8:15; *Sir.* 26:7). Furthermore, since their leader is Apollyon (Rev. 9:11), these are clearly not ordinary locusts.

9:4 The locusts are instructed, presumably by God (showing again that they are the agents of his judgment), to spare the green grass, new green growth, and trees. Instead, they are to concentrate their destruction on those who lack God's seal on their foreheads. The 144,000, representing the people of God, have been sealed by him and protected from his wrath (cf. 7:1–17; cf. Ezek. 9:4, 6). Therefore the locusts attack unbelievers, those who will face the full brunt of God's wrath. We have further and decisive evidence that the locusts aren't literal, for these locusts have no interest in eating green grass or plants. No one has ever heard of locusts that don't eat green plants! The locusts ate every plant when Egypt was devastated (Ex. 10:12; cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 16:9). But these locusts are interested only in attacking human beings, demonstrating that these are bizarre locusts. In fact, they are not locusts at all but demons from the abyss.

9:5 God did not permit (“it was not given [*edothē*”]) the locusts to kill unbelievers not sealed by God. Instead, they torment them for “five months.” Five is a symbolic number here, signifying a limited period of time. The torment is compared to the sting of a scorpion. We are reminded, although the context is different, of God allowing Satan to afflict righteous Job but not to kill him (Job 2:4–7). Here too, God determines the extent of the torment to be inflicted. Since the text is laden with symbolic language about locusts as demons, the stings should not be construed as literal stings. Indeed, John says the torture was *like* (*hōs*) the torment inflicted by scorpions. It is difficult to be certain what John has in mind. The first four trumpet judgments covered the created world from skies to oceans, and here John refers to human beings. The reference is probably to the psychological misery and unhappiness marking human existence. Perhaps the reference to five months indicates such torment isn’t constant or all-encompassing.

9:6 The life of human beings is beset by wretchedness, ultimately because we have rebelled against God. Hence, there is a desire for death (cf. Job 3:21; Jer. 8:3), but also a desire for life, and the two war in the human breast, tormenting human existence. Unbelievers want to die, but at the same time they fear to die. John is not saying every fallen human is suicidal or deeply unhappy. His point is that torment and a desire to die characterize human existence, particularly the lives of unbelievers. The experience is complex and difficult to describe, but in any case life on earth can be a kind of living death. The desire to die wells up in us, and yet death flees from those who have turned against God, since there is both a longing for death and a great fear of dying.

9:7 In the next several verses John describes the locusts. It is clear from the outset that the description isn’t literal, for the word “like” is used three times to indicate similes instead of literal descriptions. The locusts are compared to horses prepared for battle (cf. Job 39:20); they have something like golden crowns on their heads, symbolizing victory. Their faces are like human beings, perhaps suggesting they combine animal and human characteristics and have power over all creation. John alludes to Joel 2:4, where we find an actual locust invasion, with locusts compared to war horses.²⁴ Joel describes the judgment of the day of the Lord (cf. Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11), and John uses the imagery of locusts to describe God’s judgment on unbelievers. They are, so to speak, under siege, as demons are unleashed upon them. It is as if a human army with horses and authority were on the attack, but their foes are worse than any human army.

9:8 The description of the locusts continues, for their hair is like women’s and their teeth like lions’. The prophet Joel is again alluded to, for Joel declares, “A nation has come up against my land, powerful and beyond number; its teeth are lions’ teeth, and it has the fangs of a lioness” (Joel 1:6). Joel uses the image of

²⁴ Scholars dispute whether locusts or a human army is in view in Joel 2. I incline to the view that actual locusts are described.

lions' teeth to describe locusts, and John, as noted above, takes up Joel's imagery into his apocalyptic symbolism. He states that the locusts have hair like women's. Long hair on locusts is ghoulish, ghastly, and eerie, which is John's point. These are otherworldly creatures—what terrifies us in nightmares punishes the ungodly. We are reminded of Joseph Stalin, who heard wolves howling as he lay dying, as if they were descending upon him to tear him apart.

9:9 These terrible locusts have breastplates of iron (showing that they cannot be killed), and the sound of their wings is likened to the clattering of attacking chariots. The imagery is again derived in part from the locust invasion described in Joel. "As with the rumbling of chariots, they leap on the tops of the mountains, like the crackling of a flame of fire devouring the stubble, like a powerful army drawn up for battle" (Joel 2:5). This locust army, John teaches, is on the attack; they are an invincible army. Humans not sealed by God are helpless to withstand the ferocity of the attack.

9:10 The torment inflicted by the stings of these scorpion-like creatures, adumbrated in verse 5, is picked up again here. We see repeatedly that these are not ordinary locusts, for locusts do not have "tails like scorpions." Nor does the literal sting of a scorpion persist for five months. As noted in verse 5, the reference to scorpions shows the demonic character of these locusts, as they inflict agony, anguish, and distress on those not sealed by God.

9:11 The demonic character of the locusts is confirmed here, for the ruler and king of the locusts is the angel with authority over the bottomless pit. Actual locusts do not have a king (cf. Prov. 30:27), but these locusts do! Some think this angel is the one who fell to earth and released these demons from the pit (Rev. 9:1), i.e., Satan himself. But I have suggested that the angel in verse 1 is a good angel and shouldn't be identified with Apollyon. Still, Apollyon in this verse is Satan himself. "Apollyon" means "destroyer"—one who destroys and ruins human beings, and the locusts become the agent of this destruction. The Hebrew "Abaddon" has the same meaning in this context, describing Satan's destructive power. In the OT, Abaddon is often parallel with Sheol and designates the place of the dead and the power of death (Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Ps. 88:11; Prov. 15:11; 27:20). John extends the meaning: the place of death is now personified, for there is a king over the dead, Satan himself (cf. Heb. 2:14–15). Job calls death the "king of terrors" (Job 18:14), and those in Satan's realm will not be spared from such terror.

9:12 The first woe, bringing much anguish and terror, has now been explicated, but there are two more to come (9:13–19; 11:15–19).

Response

In this text we see a fascinating confluence of divine sovereignty, demonic agency, and human misery. Ultimately, God is sovereign, even over the actions of the Devil and demons. We see the malevolence of the Devil and demons in the anguish they

bring into the lives of human beings. At the same time, God is sovereign over the torment human beings feel; it is his punishment on the ungodly. Yet, he uses the Devil and demons as his agents in inflicting misery. Still, God's role in what happens to humans is dramatically different from that of the Devil and demons, for God always does what is holy and just, while the Devil and demons are filled with hate and spite. We also learn from this text that sin brings anguish and torment. Initially, it may be pleasurable (Heb. 11:25), but there is a sting in the tail (pun intended!), and the end result is grief. When we see human beings controlled by self-pity, anger, lust, and jealousy, full of unhappiness and rage against life, it is part of the judgment of God. They are under Satan's dominion. Their lives are slowly unraveling, and pretty soon the thread is gone and only insanity remains. Everyone in hell is insane, for there is nothing more insane than the worship of self and the hatred of God. This too is part of God's judgment on the human race.

REVELATION 9:13–21

¹³Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God, ¹⁴saying to the sixth angel who had the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." ¹⁵So the four angels, who had been prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, were released to kill a third of mankind. ¹⁶The number of mounted troops was twice ten thousand times ten thousand; I heard their number. ¹⁷And this is how I saw the horses in my vision and those who rode them: they wore breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire¹ and of sulfur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulfur came out of their mouths. ¹⁸By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulfur coming out of their mouths. ¹⁹For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails, for their tails are like serpents with heads, and by means of them they wound.

²⁰The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, ²¹nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts.

¹Greek *hyacinth*

Section Overview

The second woe is rehearsed in Revelation 9:13–19, while verses 20–21 are the response to God's judgments. People should repent upon seeing and experiencing the judgment of God, but instead they further harden their hearts. The second woe

occurs at the blast of the sixth trumpet. A voice from the golden altar tells the angel with the trumpet to release the four angels bound at the Euphrates (vv. 13–14). The angels are released and kill one-third of the human race, as they were destined to do (v. 15). John *hears* the number of 200 million mounted troops (v. 16), and he *sees* horses and horsemen in his vision (v. 17; cf. 5:5–6; 7:4, 9). The horsemen had breastplates of red, blue, and sulfur yellow. These horses are unlike any other, for their heads are like the heads of lions, with fire, smoke, and sulfur coming from their mouths. Hence John probably describes demons here. This demonic horde slays a third of the human race with fire, smoke, and sulfur (9:18). The unearthly character and demonic nature of these horses is apparent again in verse 19. The power of the horses is located in their mouths and tails. The focus is on their tails, which are like snakes and inflict injury, presumably death, on others. The death of a third of the human race (almost certainly not a literal number) functions to warn those who so far have escaped death (v. 20). On seeing God’s just judgment, they should repent of their idolatry. But the hardness of their hearts is evident, for they continue in their evil despite seeing the consequences of the evil they embraced (v. 21).

Section Outline

- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19) . . .
- C. Sixth Trumpet: Demonic Cavalry (9:13–21)

Comment

9:13 The sixth angel sounds his trumpet, and the contents of this judgment represent the second woe (cf. 8:13; 9:12). The trumpet judgments are from a censer of incense hurled from the altar of incense onto the earth (8:1–5), and John hears a voice from the four horns on the altar of incense (Ex. 27:2; 30:2–3). Horns on altars don’t typically speak, but this is apocalyptic literature! Perhaps the voice represents an angel speaking. The connection with the altar reminds us that the judgments are an answer to the prayers of the saints (Rev. 8:3–4).

9:14 The voice from the altar instructs the (good) angel with the sixth trumpet to release the four angels being detained at the Euphrates River. Earlier, four angels were restraining the winds of judgment from being unleashed on the earth (7:1). Here the bound angels are probably demons, since the language of binding is used elsewhere of Satan (Matt. 12:29; Mark 3:27; Rev. 20:2); they cannot be the same angels described in 7:1, as the location is different. The Euphrates River comes into the picture again with this judgment (Rev. 16:12). In the OT, the Euphrates’ headwaters were in the land of Eden (Gen. 2:14), and the river was the border of the land promised to Abraham (Gen. 15:18; cf. Deut. 1:7; Josh. 1:4) and possessed finally by Solomon (1 Kings 4:21, 24). The enemies of God and his people, however, were on the far side of the Euphrates. John is also perhaps alluding to the Parthians, enemies of Rome who invaded from the east in 53 BC and AD 62. So here, too, wicked forces are unleashed from the Euphrates.

9:15 The four angels bound at the Euphrates are released to kill a third of humanity. The Euphrates was the boundary between the Roman and Parthian Empires, and thus the Parthian enemies would have come over the Euphrates (cf. *1 En.* 56:6–57:3). “Released” (*elythēsan*) suggests they are demons, as Satan is also “released” (*lyō*; Rev. 20:3, 7) by God. Good angels aren’t “released” but are commissioned or sent, whereas demons are restrained by God but sometimes released and permitted by him to undertake specific activities. The reference to the hour, day, month, and year probably does not mean the punishment took place on a specific day. It refers to the era in which this punishment took place, and John probably has in mind the entire period between Christ’s resurrection and second coming. Others place this punishment in a final seven-year tribulation period, but, as we have seen, there is no warrant in Scripture for a seven-year period of tribulation (cf. comment on 7:13–14). The slaying of a third of human beings does not represent a literal number but means the attacks led to the death of a great number of people. We see the same emphasis on one-third in previous trumpet judgments (8:7–12). The death inflicted by demons uses ordinary means, such as disease and pestilence (cf. 6:3–8), and so what John records here fits with the seal judgments, overlapping them temporally. At the same time, it seems the trumpets represent an intensification of what we see in the seal judgments. In the fifth trumpet (9:1–12), we see unbelievers longing to die because of their misery. The sixth trumpet and the second woe (9:13–21) show people dying because of demonic activity. This demonic activity is not visible to us, of course, since demons use ordinary means to accomplish their purposes. In particular, demons use false teaching to deceive and advance their purposes (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1–5), and hence it is possible the death described here refers to both spiritual and physical death. Ultimately, the spiritually dead also die physically and eternally. They experience what Revelation calls the “second death” (Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

9:16 John *hears* the number of the demonic army, a staggering 200 million. Earlier we noted that John heard the number of the 144,000 (7:4). The number isn’t literal, of course, but designates an incalculable army. In any case, John isn’t talking about a human army, for the release of the four demonic angels (cf. 9:14–15) unleashes an incomprehensibly evil demonic horde.

9:17 The horses and their riders constitute a massive army. The riders have breastplates of fire, sapphire, and sulfur, but the horses are truly “out of this world,” for their heads are like lions, and fire, smoke, and sulfur belch from their mouths. John is not describing modern weaponry, nor does he depict literal horses. His point is that this army is no ordinary army; it isn’t a human army at all. He uses symbolic language to describe a demonic horde inflicting death on human beings, and the death in view is fundamentally spiritual death—separation from God, leading to physical and eternal death.

9:18 The fire, smoke, and sulfur coming from the horses' mouths represent three plagues. The number three is symbolic, and thus the plagues refer to every kind of disease, virus, and pestilence that kills human beings. Satanic teachings are probably also in view. The plagues poured out on unbelieving Egypt foreshadow the judgments recorded here.

9:19 These horses are nothing like horses in this world, for the power to injure people is in their mouths and tails. Their tails are like serpents, signaling demonic power at work. The language is apocalyptic and symbolic. John is not anticipating modern weaponry. Instead, he teaches that the plagues come from demonic powers. Demons destroy human beings, especially through false teaching that separates unbelievers from God.

9:20 The judgments meted out on human beings are intended to provoke other unbelievers ("the rest" are non-Christians) to repent (cf. 16:9, 11). In this sense, the judgments have a redemptive purpose. Unfortunately, those who were not killed by these plagues do not repent. John is not intending to make a universal statement here, as if no unbeliever ever repents upon seeing God's judgment on others. The hyperbolic nature of the statement is typical of apocalyptic literature. Another way of stating John's point here is that, in general, those who remain unbelievers are stubborn and do not turn to God even when they see depictions of the coming judgment.

The reason for the failure to repent is elaborated further. People do not want to turn from "the works of their hands." Repentance means to confess that what one has done is evil. But humans do not repent because they are too proud to admit that what they have done is wrong.

The reason men do not repent is pursued further. It is a matter of worship and affections. Humans grow attached to demons (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 96:5; 1 Cor. 10:20) and idols (cf. Jer. 1:16; Dan. 5:4, 23). The attachment to idols is foolish and futile, showing how disordered our affections are, for idols cannot see, hear, or walk (cf. Pss. 115:4–7; 135:15–17). What John writes here is deeply informed by the OT. Isaiah says concerning Israel, "Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made" (Isa. 2:8). In other words, idols can't deliver what we long for them to provide, and yet unbelievers, because of spiritual blindness, fail to see this (cf. Isa. 2:20), whereas those who do repent perceive that idols cannot deliver what they promise (Isa. 17:8).

9:21 Verse 21 zeros in on various sins requiring repentance, specifically murder, sorcery, sexual immorality, and theft (cf. Gal. 5:20; Rev. 21:8; 22:15). It is striking that all of these sins are forbidden in the Ten Commandments. Sorcery relies on another god besides the Lord (cf. 2 Kings 9:22; Nah. 3:4), thereby taking his name in vain (cf. Ex. 20:3, 7). Murder and stealing reveal how human beings secure their well-being through their own machinations, while sexual immorality pursues pleasure on our terms instead of through adherence to God's standards.

Response

God displays his sovereignty and justice in punishing those who pursue evil. Still, there is a redemptive motive in such punishments, for it displays the ultimate consequences of rebellion against God to those who have not repented. Still, many humans refuse to turn from their sin and repudiate their idols. They are blinded by their idols, thinking they can bring joy and fulfillment, and yet their idols lead to futility, to profound emptiness and disillusionment. Other gods can never substitute for the one true and living God. Our only joy and satisfaction come through him.

REVELATION 10:1–11

10 Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. ²He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, ³and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring. When he called out, the seven thunders sounded. ⁴And when the seven thunders had sounded, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down.” ⁵And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven ⁶and swore by him who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be no more delay, ⁷but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

⁸Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again, saying, “Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.” ⁹So I went to the angel and told him to give me the little scroll. And he said to me, “Take and eat it; it will make your stomach bitter, but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.” ¹⁰And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it. It was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it my stomach was made bitter. ¹¹And I was told, “You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and languages and kings.”

Section Overview

We expect the seventh trumpet to follow the sixth trumpet, but Revelation 10:1–11:14 is an interlude prior to the final trumpet. In this interlude, John prepares readers for the seventh trumpet by emphasizing the prophetic ministry of the church—the proclamation of God’s Word. Chapter 10 begins with a mighty

angel coming down from heaven, glorious in his appearance (v. 1). The angel has a small scroll in his hand, probably different from the one with seven seals (cf. 5:1–6:17). The angel's message is universal, for he plants his feet on the sea and the land (10:2). His voice roars like a lion, and the seven thunders also speak (v. 3), but John isn't permitted to write down what they say (v. 4), indicating that part of what is to come is hidden. The angel then swears by the God who created all things that the time of the end has come and God will conclude and fulfill what is prophesied by the seventh trumpet (vv. 5–7). The old creation is coming to an end, as John prophesied, but the seven thunders inform us that not everything to come is revealed to us. Nevertheless, God's mystery will be revealed, and what was prophesied will be fulfilled. John is then told to take and eat the angel's scroll (vv. 8–9). It is like honey in his mouth but bitter in his stomach (v. 10). God's Word is sweet like honey, but it prophesies destruction against those who turn from him. John is given the scroll to eat because he must prophesy further against people, nations, languages, and kings (v. 11). History will end with the seventh trumpet, but John has more to say about the course of history, and he will pull back the curtain on Satan and the beast (12:1–14:20) and the great harlot Babylon (17:1–19:10) in succeeding chapters.

Section Outline

- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19) . . .
 - D. Interlude (10:1–11:14)
 - 1. Renewed Call to Prophecy (10:1–11)

Comment

10:1 John sees another mighty angel, just as he earlier saw a mighty angel asking who was worthy to open the scroll with seven seals (5:2). The angel here descends from heaven (cf. Dan. 12:5), just as others do later in the book (Rev. 18:1; 20:1). The angel is described in glorious terms: he is “wrapped in a cloud,” which often denotes God's presence (cf. Ex. 13:21; 14:19; 16:10; 24:15; Lev. 16:2; Num. 9:15; Deut. 31:15; 1 Kings 8:10; Neh. 9:12, 19; Ps. 99:7; Isa. 19:1; Ezek. 1:28), and thus is an emissary of the Lord. The “rainbow over his head” also signifies God's presence and authority (cf. Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 4:3). The angel's face shines with the sun, just as Jesus' face shone with the glory of God (Matt. 17:2; Rev. 1:16). His feet are “pillars of fire,” while Jesus' were burnished bronze (1:15).

Since the angel is described in such glorious terms, we might think he is Jesus himself, for the word “angel” means messenger, and Jesus could be God's messenger. Despite the attractiveness of this view, it should be rejected for the following reasons. First, Jesus is never called an angel in Revelation, and, in fact, the worship of God and Jesus is clearly distinguished from worship of an angel (19:10; 22:8–9). Second, an angel may be described in glorious terms, some of which are true also of God, and yet be distinct from him (cf. Dan. 10:5–6 and comments on Rev. 1:13–16). Third, the angel swears by God, suggesting that he himself is not

divine (10:6). Fourth, the reference to “another mighty angel” points back to the same expression in 5:2, where an angel is clearly in view (cf. also 18:21).

10:2 The angel holds in his hand a little scroll, which should be distinguished, contrary to some commentators, from the seven-sealed scroll, for several reasons (5:1–6:17). First, the scroll is given to John instead of to the Lion of the tribe of Judah (10:9). Second, John does not open the scroll but eats it (10:9–10). Third, in Ezekiel, which John draws on here, the scroll is open, but the scroll in chapters 5–6 is sealed until opened by the Lamb. Fourth, God holds the scroll in chapter 5, but here the angel holds it.

The angel puts one foot on land and one on the sea, implying he is larger than life (cf. Dan. 12:5), and John communicates that the angel’s message is for the entire world, for those who live on land and those who sail the seas.

10:3 The angel roars like a lion, and when the Lord roars he judges those he roars against (Joel 3:16; Amos 1:2; 3:8). We see again that the angel is God’s agent, roaring on his behalf. The shouting of the angel resounds, and the “seven thunders” also peal forth. The seven thunders remind us of Psalm 29, where a thunderous storm sweeps the land. When the Lord thunders, he judges those opposed to him (cf. Ex. 9:23, 28; 1 Sam. 2:10; 7:10; Isa. 29:6) or shows his awesome holiness (Ex. 19:16, 19; 20:18). In Revelation the final judgment is accompanied by thunder (Rev. 8:5; 11:19; 16:18; 19:6). As the number seven is symbolic, the seven thunders probably depict a full revelation of God’s majesty and wrath.

10:4 The seven thunders resound, and John is about to write the message communicated. Suddenly, John is interrupted by a heavenly voice instructing him not to reveal the content of the seven thunders. He is to “seal up” their message instead of writing it down. This stands in contrast to the remainder of the book, for John is told at the conclusion of the book *not* to seal up the message, for the end is imminent (22:10). In this respect, the sealing of the seven thunders echoes the command to Daniel to seal up what he had written, since it related to the end of time (Dan. 8:26; 12:9). Revelation, as a whole, must be distinguished from Daniel, since “the time is near” (Rev. 1:3), and thus the message is revealed to John’s generation. Nevertheless, the message of the seven thunders is similar to the message given to Daniel, for the readers are left in the dark as to its contents. In other words, the fullness of what is to come at the end is still concealed and hidden from believers. Not everything is disclosed; surprises still await us as history draws to a close.

10:5–7 John sees the angel lift his hand to heaven and swear by the God who made all things—heaven, earth, and sea. As the creator of all things, God rules and reigns over all (cf. Gen. 14:19, 22; Neh. 9:6; Ps. 146:6). The angel declares that the time of delay is over. The angel in Daniel’s day lifted up his hand to heaven and swore that there was still a significant delay before the end (Dan. 12:6–7; cf. Deut. 32:40), but here the angel declares that the end has arrived. The angel is not saying that temporal existence will cease, that eternity will consist of an eternal

now. That question is fascinating, but John is not considering such a philosophical matter here. He means, as verse 7 makes plain, that the time of the old creation has ended and the new creation prophesied in Revelation 21:1–22:5 is at hand. The sounding of the seventh trumpet by the seventh angel will wrap up history as we know it (11:15). God’s “mystery” will be fulfilled. Mystery in the Scriptures typically refers to something previously hidden that is now revealed (e.g., Rom. 16:25–26; Eph. 1:9; 3:3–5; Col. 1:26–27). When the end comes, everything hidden (including the seven thunders just noted in Rev. 10:3–4) will be fulfilled. All that God predicted and prophesied to his prophets will become a reality (cf. Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6). The plans and purposes of creation, both revealed and hidden to us in part (Deut. 29:29), will be fulfilled. God’s prophecies are both a prophecy fulfilled and a mystery to be revealed. One of the purposes of the interlude is explained here. John underscores that the seventh trumpet is the end of this present evil age, and the conclusion of all things sums up divine mysteries and fulfills God’s prophecies.

10:8–10 The heavenly voice addresses John again (cf. 10:4), instructing him to take the scroll from the angel standing with one foot on the sea and one on land. When John takes the scroll, he is instructed to eat it. John’s eating echoes Ezekiel, whom God commands to eat the scroll given to him (Ezek. 2:8–3:3). Similarly, Jeremiah says, “Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer. 15:16). John’s taking and eating the scroll signifies his prophetic ministry, and as the church proclaims John’s message it shares in this prophetic ministry. Eating the scroll will make John’s stomach bitter, but it will also be sweet like honey in his mouth. Again the words echo Ezekiel, who is to fill his stomach with the scroll, which was “in my mouth as sweet as honey” (Ezek. 3:3). God’s Word is always a delight, always a joy (cf. Pss. 19:10; 119:103). On the other hand, eating the scroll gives John a stomachache because it is a word of judgment. Such a perspective fits with Ezekiel, for Ezekiel also prophesied judgment, and his scroll contained “words of lamentation and mourning and woe” (Ezek. 2:10). Alternatively, some think this means that John’s stomach is bitter because the church will face persecution, but the word is sweet in his mouth because the church will triumph. This interpretation seems less likely, since it does not match as closely the prophecy in Ezekiel. Furthermore, the next verse indicates the message has to do with the judgment destined for those who oppose God and refuse to worship him.

10:11 The significance of eating the scroll is now communicated to John. The verb here is actually plural, “*They* said to me” (NRSV), perhaps to represent the words of the prophets that John has ingested. The contents of the scroll, as noted above, made John’s stomach ache, indicating that judgment is coming. Here the meaning of eating the scroll is explained further. Just as Ezekiel eats the scroll before he prophesies (Ezek. 2:8–3:3), so here John’s eating of the scroll means he must prophecy against peoples, nations, languages, and many kings (cf. Jer. 25:30; Ezek. 25:2). “Must” indicates that John’s prophetic ministry and the prophetic ministry of

the church is a divine necessity. We gain further insight into the interlude between the sixth and seventh trumpets; the seventh trumpet signals the end of the old creation, but there is more to be said in subsequent chapters about the course of history. In particular, John will pull back the curtain on the activity of Satan and the beast before the time of the end (Rev. 12:1–14:20) and on the role of Rome, the great Babylon (17:1–19:5). What John emphasizes here, then, is the judgment to be imposed on (*epi*) nations, tongues, peoples, and kings.

Response

The message of the seven thunders reminds us that Revelation doesn't provide a complete map of things to come. Prophecy charts are popular in evangelicalism, and many have been very specific. But while God has revealed the broad outlines of the future, many things are hidden and concealed from us. We must not go beyond what is written and make assertions about what God has not revealed to us.

We also see in this passage that the Word of God is sweet and delightful; it tastes like honey in our mouth and fills us with joy. Even if the message is one of judgment, the Word of God has sweetness because his Word is truth. On the other hand, the Word can also cause pain and anguish when proclaiming judgment. We think of the tears of Jeremiah, who prophesied judgment against Judah and wept over what was to come (Jer. 8:21; 9:1; 13:17). Jesus also wept over the destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37–39), showing that the judgment coming upon the city caused him intense grief. So too, we should weep and groan when the message to our culture is one of judgment and destruction. We do not desire the death of those to whom we minister. We resonate with the words of the Lord in Ezekiel: "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live" (Ezek. 18:32).

REVELATION 11:1–2

11 Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, "Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, ²but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months."

Section Overview

The interlude continues. John continues prophesying (cf. Rev. 10:11) and is instructed to take a measuring rod and measure the temple, altar, and worshipers (11:1). As will be explained below, this symbolizes God's protection of the saints,

those who belong to him. The courtyard of the temple, however, is not protected (v. 2). The nations will trample the holy city of Jerusalem for forty-two months. In other words, even though God protects his people from his wrath, they will still face persecution and trouble, which will last the entire time from the resurrection to the second coming.

Section Outline

- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19) . . .
 - D. Interlude (10:1–11:14) . . .
 - 2. Temple Protected (11:1–2)

Comment

11:1 John is given a measuring rod and instructed to measure the temple, altar, and worshipers in the temple. The instructions are reminiscent of what we find in Ezekiel, where a man is given a measuring reed to measure the temple (Ezek. 40:3, 5, 6). Later in Revelation, the heavenly Jerusalem descending to earth is also measured (Rev. 21:15–16; cf. Zech. 2:1–2). The measuring of the temple and the city means the temple or city will be built and will prosper and will be secure from attack. Some interpreters understand John to teach here that the temple in Jerusalem will be rebuilt where the Dome of the Rock is presently, and that the altar will be rebuilt as well. It is difficult to be sure which altar John has in mind—the altar of burnt offering or the altar of incense (cf. Rev. 6:9; 8:3, 5; 9:13; 14:18; 16:7)—although the altar of incense seems more likely, since it is associated with God’s sanctuary. When we consider the apocalyptic genre of Revelation and the symbolism pervading the book, a literal reading is unlikely, and thus John is not thinking of the rebuilding of a literal temple or altar. Instead, all three descriptions refer to the people of God, so that the temple and the altar refer to those who worship God. Believers are called a “temple” because they are the dwelling place of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16), and indeed in Revelation 21:1–22:5 (cf. also Rev. 7:15) the whole universe is portrayed as God’s dwelling place. The worshipers are individuals of God’s people—they are God’s temple. They are also designated in terms of the altar, for their lives are devoted to and surrendered to God. To say that the temple, altar, and worshipers are measured is to say that God protects and watches over his people—they are under his care, his lordship, and his sovereign oversight.

11:2 John is told not to measure the courtyard outside the temple (cf. Ezek. 10:5; 40:17, 19, 20, 31). The courtyard is given to the nations, i.e., unbelievers, who will trample the holy city for forty-two months. Some interpret this to say Gentiles will literally defile the courtyard outside the temple for three and a half years and will control Jerusalem during this time. Such a reading is unpersuasive and fails to see the symbolism employed here. What John teaches is that the people of God will be protected by him; they will not face his wrath (cf. Rev. 11:1). Nevertheless,

they will not be spared persecution from unbelievers. The “holy city” refers often to Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 48:2; 52:1; Dan. 9:24; Matt. 4:5; 27:53). John uses the term elsewhere to refer to the city to come (Rev. 21:2, 10; 22:19), and in Revelation 21:2 the city is compared to a bride, showing that the city could also be a people (cf. comments on 21:1–2). We see a similar concept in Paul, who says the Jerusalem above is the mother of believers (Gal. 4:26). So, when John speaks of the holy city’s being trampled for forty-two months by Gentiles (cf. Ps. 79:1; Isa. 63:18; Dan. 8:11–14; Zech. 12:3; Luke 21:24),²⁵ he teaches that believers who are even now members of the heavenly city (cf. Heb. 12:22) are persecuted during this time period.

The Gentiles will trample the holy city for forty-two months. Some understand this number literally, taking it to refer to three and a half years in the tribulation period. John draws here on the seventieth week in the prophecy of Daniel (Dan. 9:24–27) and alludes perhaps to the three-and-one-half-year ministry of Elijah (Luke 4:25; James 5:17). I would suggest the seventieth week in Daniel designates not a literal period of time but the final era in history, the time between Jesus’ resurrection and second coming. The number seven refers symbolically to this last period of time, and such a symbolic understanding fits nicely with the book of Revelation.

A symbolic reading also accords with the context of Daniel 9, for Daniel learns that the seventy years of exile described by Jeremiah actually refer to a much longer period of time. The meaning of Daniel 9:24–27 is intensely controversial, and space is lacking to defend what is suggested here. When Daniel says sacrifice and offering are ended for “half of the week” (Dan. 9:27), he most likely refers to the death of Jesus, which ended all sacrifices as the final and definitive sacrifice for believers (Heb. 8:1–10:18). Hence, the first half of the seventieth week ended with Jesus’ death and resurrection. John picks up the reference to half a week and applies it symbolically to his readers, designating the time after Jesus’ death when evil rules. Thus, half a week or forty-two months is not a literal period of time but refers to the entire period between Jesus’ resurrection and his second coming. It is described as half a week in dependence on Daniel 9:27. The half-week denoted here may have begun with Jesus’ death or resurrection, or, alternatively, with the destruction of the temple in AD 70, though the former is more likely. In either case, the time period symbolizes the period until Jesus comes again. John refers to this period of time in various ways. Here he speaks of forty-two months (cf. also Rev. 13:5). Elsewhere, he speaks of 1,260 days (11:3; 12:6) and of “time, and times, and half a time” (12:14), another way of speaking of three and one-half years. In every instance, the period of time is the same.

The three and one-half years is a time when evil reigns and the people of God face opposition. We see in 11:2 that believers are trampled (persecuted) by unbelievers (cf. Isa. 63:18; Dan. 8:13) during this time period. In 12:6 we learn that the people of God are nourished and protected by God for 1,260 days, and 11:1 com-

²⁵ The references cited here refer to the judgment of the literal city of Jerusalem, but John writes symbolically and does not refer to the actual city of Jerusalem.

municates the same notion (that believers are protected by God) when it speaks of measuring the temple. Revelation 12:14 reiterates the same message after telling the reader that the Devil is trying to destroy the woman: even though believers face persecution and death, God is watching over them. In 13:5 we are told the beast exercises authority for forty-two months and during that time makes war against the saints (13:7). The experience of believers during this present evil age is complex. On the one hand, God protects and sustains his own. On the other hand, they face persecution and death at the hands of Satan and the beast. To sum up, forty-two months, 1,260 days, and time, times, and half a time all refer to the same period of time, when Satan and his allies persecute the church, extending from Jesus' resurrection to his second coming.

Response

These two verses summarize the glory and the agony of existence in this present evil world. On the one hand, believers are protected and guarded by God. Nothing can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ, as Paul teaches (Rom. 8:35–39). The Good Shepherd always tends his sheep and never forsakes or leaves them (John 10:1–15). On the other hand, those who belong to Jesus Christ will experience discrimination, hatred, and even death. Life in this world is not easy but is marked by suffering, distress, and opposition, and yet God is with us, guarding, guiding, nourishing, and strengthening until the end.

REVELATION 11:3–14

³“And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.”

⁴These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. ⁵And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. ⁶They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. ⁷And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit¹ will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, ⁸and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically² is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. ⁹For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, ¹⁰and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who

dwell on the earth. ¹¹ But after the three and a half days a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. ¹² Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up here!” And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them. ¹³ And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

¹⁴ The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come.

¹Or the abyss ²Greek *spiritually*

Section Overview

In Revelation 11:1–2 we saw the church protected by God even when persecuted. In 11:3–14 we see what the church is doing in the period between Jesus’ resurrection and return, and how the world responds. These verses are among the most difficult in Revelation, and interpreters differ regarding their meaning. In this commentary, space is lacking to delineate the various positions. I will argue that the two witnesses refer to the church, which testifies to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the period between the cross and second coming (v. 3). They are the olive trees (filled by the Spirit) and lampstands (proclaiming God’s message to the world; v. 4). They proclaim God’s judgment on those rejecting their message (vv. 5–6). The world is infuriated by the gospel they proclaim and puts them to death and celebrates their demise (vv. 7–10). Ultimately, however, believers in Jesus Christ will be vindicated by God (vv. 11–12), and judgment will fall on those who refuse to repent (v. 13). The second woe has concluded, and the third woe is imminent (v. 14), coming in verses 15–19.

Section Outline

- V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19) . . .
 - D. Interlude (10:1–11:14) . . .
 - 3. Two Witnesses Empowered, Killed, and Vindicated (11:3–14)

Comment

11:3 God has appointed two witnesses clothed in sackcloth to prophesy for 1,260 days. The identity of the two witnesses has been the subject of controversy. The activities described in the subsequent verses make us think of Moses and Elijah. Others think Enoch is one of the two in mind, and there are many other suggestions as well. But it is most probable that the two witnesses refer to the church as a whole, with the number two echoing the OT requirement for two witnesses to validate a claim (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Several pieces of evidence support this conclusion. (1) The witnesses are persecuted by the beast (Rev. 11:7), as is the church as a whole (13:7). Daniel predicted that the people of God would be attacked by the fourth beast and its horn: “This horn made war with the saints and prevailed

over them” (Dan. 7:21). (2) The entire world sees their suffering and triumph (Rev. 11:9–13), which fits most naturally with a reference to the entire church, a worldwide entity. (3) The 1,260 days refers to the entire period between Christ’s resurrection and second advent. The church witnesses to the world what God has done in Jesus Christ, declaring salvation to all who put their trust in him and judgment to those who refuse to repent and believe. The church, as the two witnesses, prophesies for 1,260 days, referring to the proclamation and declaration of God’s Word. In Revelation 11:10 the two witnesses are described as “two prophets.” Again, the number is symbolic, but the reference to prophecy both here and in verse 10 shows that the church has a particular responsibility to declare God’s message of salvation offered in Jesus Christ, while also warning about judgment to those who refuse him. We see in the NT that the church of Jesus Christ is a prophetic community empowered by the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28–32; Acts 2:17–21). The 1,260 days, as explained in my comment on Revelation 11:2 above, refers to the entire period between the first and second coming of Christ. The church’s task as it waits for the return of the Lord is to proclaim the gospel, yet it is clothed in sackcloth while doing so. Sackcloth is worn in mourning (Gen. 37:34; 2 Sam. 3:31) or when judgment arrives (1 Kings 21:27; Neh. 9:1; Isa. 3:24). The church is clothed with sackcloth because it proclaims the need to repent, warning of the judgment to come.

11:4 The two witnesses, i.e., the church of Jesus Christ, are also described as two olive trees and two lampstands standing before the Lord of the earth. John here picks up on Zechariah 4, where Joshua the priest and Zerubbabel the governor are described as two olive trees (Zech. 4:3, 11, 12). The parallel to Zechariah 4:14 is also evident, for Joshua and Zerubbabel are identified as the “two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth.” Zerubbabel and Joshua were king and priest, and so by speaking of the two anointed ones and the two olive trees, John refers to the church as a kingdom of priests (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). As priests and kings they mediate God’s blessing and gracious rule over the world. Kings and priests were anointed by the Spirit (Ex. 28:41; 29:7; 1 Sam. 10:1; 16:12–13), and the anointing here suggests the church, as a kingdom of priests, is anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Significantly, the oil of the olives fills the lampstand so that it can yield its light (Zech. 4:11–12), suggesting the oil is the power of the Spirit enabling the two witnesses to prophesy by speaking forth the Word of the Lord (Zech. 4:6). The church is God’s lampstand, shining forth to the world in both word and deed (Matt. 5:16).

11:5 Those who desire to harm the two witnesses will themselves suffer harm. As explained above, the two witnesses symbolize believers who witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. If people wish to injure them, fire will come from the mouth of the witnesses to consume their enemies. Certainly, this language is symbolic and apocalyptic, for it is quite unlikely that fire literally comes out of people’s mouths! The fire signifies judgment pronounced on those who refuse to heed the message.

Elijah brought fire from heaven twice to consume the enemies of the Lord (2 Kings 1:10, 12), and in Jeremiah the Lord says, “I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall consume them” (Jer. 5:14). In the same way, those who reject the gospel proclaimed by the church will be killed and will face God’s blazing judgment.

11:6 John continues to use symbolic language to describe the judgment poured out on the world by the church of Jesus Christ. The church is able to “shut the sky” so that it does not rain during the time of their proclamation, and it is able to turn water into blood and call down horrendous plagues on enemies. Again, some understand this literally, but just as fire doesn’t literally come out of the mouth of the church, so here too the judgments are symbolic. John picks up biblical language of judgment to depict judgment on the ungodly. Prevention of rain, of course, reminds us of Elijah, who prophesied there would be no rain except by his word (1 Kings 17:1). Turning water into blood echoes what Moses did during the exodus (Ex. 7:17–21), and Moses summoned forth many other plagues as well. These plagues and judgments anticipate the judgment to come, a judgment pronounced by the church of Jesus Christ against those who refuse to listen to its message.

11:7 When the two witnesses—the church—have finished their testimony, the beast from the pit will wage war, conquer, and kill the witnesses. Some interpreters see here a literal martyrdom of the two witnesses. Some have, therefore, seen a reference to Enoch and Elijah, for these two men did not die during their earthly lives, and these interpreters argue that they will die in the future. But it is very unlikely that Enoch and Elijah will return to earth and live their lives again! The apocalyptic genre tilts us instead to a symbolic reading. John teaches that the church will give testimony to Jesus Christ (cf. Rev. 1:2, 9; 19:10; 20:4), but this testimony will be contested and opposed. The beast rising from the abyss will stand against the church and its testimony. This is the first mention of the beast in Revelation, and he will receive particular attention in chapters 13 and 17 (cf. comments). In John’s context the beast was the Roman Empire, standing for totalitarian government opposed to God. The beast comes “from the bottomless pit” or “abyss” (cf. also Rev. 17:8). Demons come from the abyss (9:1–2), and Satan is locked in the abyss for a thousand years (20:1, 3). The beast, then, has a demonic origin (12:17–13:1). When the beast, the Roman Empire, comes on the scene, it makes war against the saints (12:17; 19:19) as it demands worship and destroys all competition. When John says the beast conquers the saints (cf. 13:7), he does not mean he overcomes them and causes apostasy (as in 2:7, 11, etc.). He means the beast takes their physical lives from them; he conquers the saints by putting them to death (cf. Dan. 7:21). But the beast does not win an ultimate victory, for in dying the saints actually triumph: they conquer by not “[loving] their lives . . . unto death” (Rev. 12:11). Once again, John is not teaching that all believers will be put to death; the church as a whole is characterized as a suffering church, a martyred church, but we should not read this as saying all believers will suffer actual martyrdom.

11:8 If one takes the two witnesses to be two individuals, it seems that John says the two witnesses will be killed and their corpses left to lie on the streets of Jerusalem. But it is more probable that the two witnesses refer to the church as a whole, proclaiming salvation and judgment to the world. The language here is apocalyptic and symbolic instead of literal. Hence, the point isn't that the corpses of the two witnesses literally lie on the streets in Jerusalem. Instead, we see that the church of Jesus Christ is scorned, maligned, and dishonored by the world. Not to bury a corpse in the ancient world was a great indignity and shame (cf. Gen. 40:19; 1 Sam. 17:44, 46; 2 Kings 9:10; *Tob.* 2:3–8). The "great city" of the world mistreats and slays believers (cf. Jer. 22:8). John says the city that is treating believers in this way is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, and thus is symbolic of the city of man, the world opposed to God. The reference to Sodom is not surprising, given its sordid history (cf. Genesis 18–19), and Sodom is often referenced as an example of a city that gave itself over to evil (Deut. 29:23; 32:32; Isa. 1:9–10; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Lam. 4:6; Amos 4:11; Zeph. 2:9). On the other hand, the reference to Egypt is quite surprising since it is not a city but a country. John signals that the word "city" is not to be taken literally, but denotes the entire world in opposition to God. In other words, John refers to what Augustine called the "city of man" over against the "city of God."

Finally, the city is identified as the place where Jesus was crucified, which was literally Jerusalem. We think of the places in the OT and NT where Jerusalem or Judah are called Sodom because of their wickedness (Isa. 1:9–10; 3:9; Jer. 23:14; Lam. 4:6; Amos 4:11; Matt. 10:15; 11:23–24; Luke 10:12; Rom. 9:29), or even are said to be worse than Sodom (Ezek. 16:46–56). John isn't indicting Jerusalem *per se*, nor is he thinking particularly of Rome. Instead, what happened in Jerusalem (the Lord was crucified) takes place all over the world, for the city of man rejects and despises the city of God.

11:9 For three and a half days the peoples of the world leave the corpses on the streets and refuse to allow them to be buried. Again, the language is apocalyptic and symbolic, so that the three and a half days should not be interpreted literally. Instead, John uses the number to denote a limited period of time, showing that the defaming of the church is limited to this present evil age. The world universally dishonors the witness of the church by denying it a tomb. We see this sentiment reflected in the words of the psalmist: "They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them" (Ps. 79:2–3; cf. 2 Kings 9:10; Jer. 14:16). We see here that the world scorns and mistreats the church as it witnesses to the salvation available through Jesus Christ.

11:10 Reference to those who "dwell on the earth" is found twice in this verse and is a technical term in Revelation for unbelievers (cf. comment on Rev. 3:10). Unbelievers will be filled with joy at the killing of Christians and will celebrate with parties and gift exchanges (cf. John 16:20). They will rejoice because the "two

prophets,” who tormented them in their unbelief, are dead—the church in its prophetic and witness-bearing role condemned the evil engaged in by the world, and the world cannot bear to be criticized in this way.

11:11 After the three and a half days elapse, the corpses suddenly stand on their feet when the “breath of life,” i.e., “the spirit of life” (*pneuma zōēs*), from God enters them. As a result, unbelievers are filled with fear. The three and one-half days should not be interpreted literally; they refer to what will happen at the end of history. John draws on the vision of the dry bones in Ezekiel 37, where God’s breath entered the dry bones and they lived and “stood on their feet” (Ezek. 37:5, 10; cf. also 37:9, 14). Ezekiel wrote of the revivifying and reuniting of Israel and Judah, but he locates its fulfillment at the resurrection. Similarly, John describes here the resurrection of the people of God, those who have witnessed to Jesus Christ. When unbelievers see their vindication, they will be gripped with fear (cf. Ex. 15:16; Ps. 105:38), knowing judgment is at hand.

11:12 When the witnesses come to life and stand on their feet, God summons them to heaven (cf. Rev. 4:1). They travel to heaven in a cloud, reminiscent of both Jesus’ ascension to heaven (Acts 1:9; cf. 1 Thess. 4:17) and Elijah’s being taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). Their enemies recognize that the witnesses belong to God and have been vindicated by him. The text is not a narration of what will happen literally but is John’s way of saying the church of Jesus Christ will be vindicated publicly by God himself, to the consternation of its enemies. Some think this cannot refer to the resurrection of believers, for then it would not make sense for further events to follow the resurrection. But when we remember that Revelation isn’t always strictly chronological, the problem vanishes.

11:13 The ascension of the two witnesses is accompanied by a great earthquake, in which one-tenth of the city falls and seven thousand are killed. Those who survive are filled with fear and give glory to God. Earthquakes in Revelation regularly signify the final judgment, and that is true here (cf. 6:12; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18). The figures of one-tenth and seven thousand designate judgment on the city of man and destruction of unbelievers. Are those who are spared and give glory to God believers? The reference could be to believers, but a reference to unbelievers is more likely in context. Unbelievers will glorify God at the judgment by acknowledging him to be in the right, and hence many interpreters understand the giving of glory to God to refer to judgment (cf. 1 Sam. 6:5; Isa. 42:12). In Daniel 4 we see Nebuchadnezzar giving glory to God, but he is not saved (Dan. 4:34; cf. Rev. 15:4). As noted in the comment on 11:12, sorting out chronological matters is difficult here, but it seems the judgment of unbelievers does not provoke other unbelievers to turn to God. Instead they are hardened in their unbelief. Nowhere else in Revelation do we find an end-time conversion of many unbelievers.

11:14 The second woe and sixth trumpet were recorded in 9:13–19. The long interlude has ended and John is ready to convey the message of the third woe and

seventh trumpet. The subsequent verses (11:15–19) represent the third woe and teach the final judgment of the wicked, when God’s kingdom is established.

Response

The church of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Spirit, is called upon to witness to the gospel and proclaim the Word of God. It promises salvation to those who repent and believe and proclaims judgment on those who refuse to put their trust in God. At the same time, the church is a suffering church. We are not the church triumphant but the church under the shadow of the cross, despised for our message. The world rejoices when believers are put to death and scorns us as messengers. But we should take heart, for we will be vindicated, while those who fail to believe will be judged. Thus we should be encouraged to continue our faithful witness.

REVELATION 11:15–19

¹⁵ Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever.” ¹⁶ And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshiped God, ¹⁷ saying,

“We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty,
who is and who was,
for you have taken your great power
and begun to reign.

¹⁸ The nations raged,
but your wrath came,
and the time for the dead to be judged,
and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints,
and those who fear your name,
both small and great,
and for destroying the destroyers of the earth.”

¹⁹ Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings,¹ peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

¹Or *voices*, or *sounds*

Section Overview

With the sounding of the seventh trumpet, history comes to an end. The kingdom now belongs to the Lord and his Christ forever (Rev. 11:15). Heaven pulsates with joy as the elders fall on their faces and worship (v. 16), giving thanks because the

everlasting God has begun his reign (v. 17). The reign of the Christ means the wicked are judged and the righteous rewarded (v. 18); the judgment of the wicked explains why this is the third woe. God's temple in heaven is opened and the ark of his covenant is seen, representing full and final access to God (v. 19), but there is also a thunderous storm of judgment for those who have refused his rule.

Section Outline

V. The Seven Trumpets (8:6–11:19) . . .

E. The Seventh Trumpet: Kingdom Come! (11:15–19)

Comment

11:15 The blasting of the final trumpet also represents the third and final woe (8:13; 9:12; 11:14), signifying that the final judgment is at hand and history has reached its conclusion. It is the third and final woe for the wicked—the last judgment has arrived. Loud voices in heaven declare the time of fulfilled promises has arrived. The kingdom is now the Lord's (Obad. 21; cf. Ps. 22:29), and “the kingdom of the world” has been transferred to “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,” and he will reign forever (cf. Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 27; Luke 1:33). Christ already reigns at the Father's right hand (Acts 2:33, 36), but at the seventh trumpet his enemies are vanquished and are made his footstool (1 Cor. 15:24–25). We see here the recursive structure of the book of Revelation, for just as in 6:12–17 and 7:15–17, we have come to the end of history, yet John continues the narrative in subsequent chapters, circling back and looking at the same themes from a fresh perspective.

11:16 Upon hearing that Christ has begun his reign, the twenty-four elders sitting on thrones before God are filled with joy and fall on their faces to worship God (cf. 4:4, 10; 5:8; 7:11; 19:4). The reign of Christ does not diminish God's glory but enhances it (cf. Phil. 2:9–11), for the one true God is worshiped as Christ's kingdom is realized.

11:17 Here we see the content of the praise voiced by the twenty-four elders. They give thanks to Almighty God, the one “who is and who was,” because he has taken the power he has always had and has begun his reign (cf. 19:6). Revelation regularly identifies God as “Almighty” (cf. comment on 1:8) and appeals to Exodus 3:14 (cf. comment on Rev. 1:4) in identifying God as the one “who is and who was.” Here John omits the reference to God as the coming one, which we find elsewhere (1:4, 8; 4:8), for here in 11:17 his coming is no longer future. He has come! And his reign has begun. He *is* the God of the universe, he always *was* the God of the universe, and *now* he reigns forevermore (cf. Pss. 47:8; 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1). We see that the reign of Christ also means the reign of God. God and Christ are not in competition, but reign in concert. We see again the Trinitarian doctrine of coinherence; what is true of the Father as God is also true of the Son as God.

11:18 The coming of the kingdom means accounts are settled—the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded. The nations are enraged against God (Ps. 2:1), hating his rule and authority over them (LXX Ex. 15:14; Ps. 98:1), and as a consequence they will face his wrath on the day of judgment (cf. Rev. 6:16–17; 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; Ps. 110:5; Jer. 30:23). The dead will be assessed and judged for their behavior (cf. Rev. 20:12). Two different assessments are made. First, God’s servants are given a reward for their faith and endurance. This reward is granted to prophets, saints, and those who fear God’s name. It is difficult to know how many groups are in view here, but there are probably two. Often in the OT the prophets are identified as God’s servants, and thus they are probably one of the groups here (e.g., 2 Kings 9:7; 21:10; Ezra 9:11; Jer. 7:25; 25:4; Ezek. 38:17; Dan. 9:6, 10; Amos 3:7; Zech. 1:6). The saints are described as those who fear God’s name, and the words “small” and “great” probably further describe the saints, who fear God’s name. God is impartial and grants the same reward whether one is deemed important or unimportant in society (cf. Rom. 2:6–11; cf. also Ps. 115:13; Rev. 19:5). On the other hand, the wicked will be judged: those who destroyed the earth will themselves be destroyed (cf. Jer. 51:25; Rev. 19:2). When the kingdom comes, everything will be set right; the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked will receive what they deserve.

11:19 When the kingdom comes, there will be full and free access to God for the saints and terrifying punishment for the wicked. God’s temple is opened in heaven and the ark of the covenant is visible in the temple. There is no temple in the new creation (21:22), and thus John does not refer to a literal temple or ark. In the OT the temple was not open to all; only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, one day a year (cf. Lev. 16:1–34; Heb. 9:7–8). But now that the kingdom has come, God’s temple (his presence) is open to all the saints. Access to God is unhindered and joyful (cf. Heb. 10:19–22). The reference to the ark of the covenant makes the same point (cf. Rev. 7:15; 15:5). Jeremiah prophesies that the ark won’t be missed in the last days (Jer. 3:16), presumably because fellowship with God will surpass what Israel enjoyed during the days of the ark. In Second Temple Judaism, we find a tradition of Jeremiah hiding the ark in a cave, saying it would be revealed when God shows his mercy to Israel and the cloud of his presence returns (2 Macc. 2:4–8). As just noted, the ark was seen only on the Day of Atonement and only by the high priest (Lev. 16:1–34), and even then it was covered with a cloud of incense. John in Revelation, of course, isn’t referring to the literal ark at all. Saying that the ark of God’s covenant is seen in the temple means God’s gracious presence is available to all—the warmth and radiance of his love is manifested personally to all his saints.

On the other hand, entering into God’s presence is never an informal affair, for he is infinitely holy, and thus there is a terrifying thunderstorm accompanied by great hail (cf. Rev. 4:5; 16:21; cf. also Ex. 9:24; Isa. 29:6; 66:6). Those who are wicked do not experience God’s gracious presence. Instead, God rains hailstones on them as they experience the thunder and lightning of his eschatological wrath.

Response

History won't last forever; evil won't triumph. Good will triumph, and God and Christ will reign forever. They will take the reins of history into their hands and dispense justice to every person, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. Things are askew now, and evil often profits the wicked. Believers are tempted to despair and discouragement, but we should be full of optimism and hope, for the triumph of evil is short-lived. The end is coming! The perfect world we long for, the world where Christ reigns, will become a reality.

REVELATION 12:1–6

12 And a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. ²She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth. ³And another sign appeared in heaven: behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems. ⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. ⁵She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule¹ all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne, ⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for 1,260 days.

¹Greek *shepherd*

Section Overview

John was told to prophesy more (Rev. 10:11), and chapters 12–14 fulfill that commission. All of history concludes with the seventh trumpet and the third woe, but John steps back so that readers can survey history from another perspective. The perspective is cosmic, encompassing the battle with the Devil (12:1–17), the emergence of the two beasts (13:1–18), and visions of heaven and earth (14:1–20). The focus in chapter 12 is on the conflict with the Devil, a conflict going back to Genesis 3. John opens up a transcendent and heavenly view for his readers. The first sign is a woman who rules the world, representing the people of God (Rev. 12:1). This woman is in agony as she is about to give birth (v. 2). But another sign appears in heaven, a red dragon who opposes the woman (v. 3). The dragon is intent upon devouring the child the woman is about to bring into the world (v. 4). The child is the one intended to rule the world as the son of David, rescued from the dragon by being exalted to God's throne (v. 5)—referring to Jesus' resurrection

and ascension. The woman flees to the wilderness for protection and is nourished by God for 1,260 days (v. 6).

Section Outline

VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20)

A. The Woman, the Child, and the Dragon (12:1–6)

Comment

12:1 The passage has a mythological quality; this doesn't mean it is false but that it draws on mythology to make a point. Myths of gods and goddesses battling with serpents or a dragon are found in Egypt, Ugarit, Mesopotamia, the Greco-Roman world, etc. John is not reproducing these myths, but they were in the air, and John adapts what was common in the culture for his own purposes and sets it into the storyline of biblical (OT) revelation. Such an observation does not stand in opposition to the visionary nature of John's experience; the literary and the visionary come together in the book. As signs of the heavens fascinated ancient people, so a great sign appears in heaven in John's vision. The sign is a woman, beautiful and exalted, clothed with the radiance of the sun. The moon is under her feet, and on her head is a crown of twelve stars (cf. Gen. 37:9). We see in this the rule of the woman, exercising her influence in the world. The identity of this woman is contested. At first glance a reference to Mary might seem fitting, since she gives birth to Christ (Rev. 12:2, 5) and flees into the wilderness of Egypt. However, it seems better to consider this a symbolic reference to the people of God. The notion of God's people as his bride is amply attested elsewhere in Scripture (e.g., Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:8–9; Ezekiel 16; 23; Hos. 2:16, 19–20; Rev. 19:7–9; 21:2, 9). God has made his people rulers (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; cf. Isa. 62:3) to mediate his priestly blessing to the world.

12:2 The woman is pregnant and suffers birth pangs. Here we have further evidence the woman is the people of God, for in the OT Israel suffers labor pains of messianic woe before salvation is accomplished (Isa. 26:17–18; 66:7–10; Mic. 4:10). Here the birth pangs bring forth a child, the son of David, the Messiah, the one who will bring in the salvation promised in the OT (Gen. 3:15; 2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:26–27; Isa. 7:14; 9:6–7; Mic. 5:2–4; cf. also Luke 1:32–33; Heb. 1:5). The rule promised to Israel, the kingdom to be theirs through the covenant with Abraham and David, would be realized through a descendant of David.

12:3 Heaven isn't free from conflict, for another sign appears in the heavens—a mythological monster, a fiery red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, with seven diadems on his head. This parodies Jesus Christ, who also is portrayed in Revelation as having horns and diadems (5:6; 19:12). The seven diadems on the dragon stand for his ruling authority, and the ten horns signify his strength (cf. 13:2). In Daniel the ten horns are ten kings belonging to the fourth beast (Dan. 7:7, 24; cf. Rev. 17:12–14). The link between the numbers of the dragon and the number of human rulers suggests the dragon manifests himself in and

through human rulers and authorities. His rule is not limited to one kingdom or time period; he continues to exert influence in age after age. Here we see that the opponent of the people of God is a terrifying monster (Rev. 12:4, 7, 9, 13, 16, 17; 13:2, 4, 11; 16:13; 20:2). The image goes back to the OT, where Isaiah prophesies that Yahweh “will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa. 27:1; cf. Isa. 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2).

12:4 The power and destructiveness of the dragon is evident, for with his tail he sweeps a third of the stars of heaven to the earth. This could possibly refer to angels (cf. Job 38:7), and some see here the moment in history where some of the angels followed Satan and became his angels (Matt. 25:41). In Daniel 8:10, however, the stars Antiochus IV Epiphanes throws to the ground and tramples are Israelites. This probably refers to the persecution of Israel by Antiochus; in alluding to this text, John likely makes the same point. The dragon’s hostility toward the people of God leads him to oppress them. Such a reading ties the two parts of the verse together: just as the dragon persecuted the people of God, so now is he ready to pounce on the woman as she is about to give birth—the dragon seeks to devour and destroy the Christ. We see such a demonic intent, for instance, in Matthew, where Herod attempts to slay Jesus in his infancy (Matt. 2:1–18).

12:5 The woman gives birth to a son (cf. Isa. 66:7), the son of David (2 Sam. 7:14), the one who was appointed, according to Psalm 2, to rule the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; cf. also Rev. 2:27). Psalm 2 is a messianic psalm, in which the Davidic king is appointed as God’s son (Ps. 2:6–7). The nations and the ends of the earth are his inheritance. In other words, the blessing promised to Abraham for the nations will become a reality through the Davidic king (Gen. 12:3). The dragon fiercely desired to slay this son, knowing this child spelled his demise. Remarkably, John skips Jesus’ ministry and death! Instead, he moves the story to Jesus’ exaltation, when he was snatched up to God and his throne. John transports us to the end of the story, showing his audience Jesus’ triumph over the dragon. The audience is not in the dark about Jesus’ life and ministry; they know he died, but here they are reminded that he conquered the dragon when he rose from the dead and ascended to take his seat at God’s right hand.

12:6 The woman, representing the people of God (though now in the story the focus is on the church of Jesus Christ after the birth and exaltation of the Messiah) flees to the wilderness, running from the persecution of Satan. The wilderness represents life in the present evil age. Just as God nurtured and preserved Israel during the forty years it wandered in the wilderness (cf. Hos. 2:14), so he provides for the church for 1,260 days, i.e., the time between Jesus’ resurrection and return (cf. comments on Rev. 11:1–2). Even though the dragon wages war against the church and puts some believers to death, God is watching over and protecting his own from apostasy, giving them spiritual strength to endure the onslaughts of Satan.

Response

It is easy to forget that we live in a time of war. The Devil has a passionate desire to destroy the people of God, and he especially tried to do away with Jesus the Messiah. But he did not and could not succeed, for Jesus now reigns at God's right hand. Since we serve a risen and victorious Christ, we have nothing to fear. We will be more than conquerors, despite our suffering, because of him who loves us.

REVELATION 12:7–12

⁷Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, ⁸but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. ¹⁰And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, “Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brothers¹ has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. ¹¹And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹²Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

¹Or *brothers and sisters*

Section Overview

John pulls back the curtain to show what happens behind the scenes, revealing a war in heaven between Michael and Satan and their angels (Rev. 12:7). The dragon and his angels were expelled from heaven (v. 8), and the one who has deceived and oppressed the people of God was thrown down to the earth (v. 9). The promised kingdom, it is declared, has come, as has the authority of Christ, for Satan as the accuser of believers has been thrown down to the earth (v. 10). We now learn the basis of the dragon's defeat, the reason he was expelled from heaven: believers conquer the dragon because the Lamb has shed his blood for them (v. 11). They also triumph in holding fast to the testimony of Jesus Christ, willing to die for its sake. There is joy in heaven over Satan's expulsion, but the coming of the kingdom is still in an already–not yet phase, as the Devil comes to the earth with fierce anger, knowing the time is short before he is defeated forever (v. 12).

Section Outline

VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20) . . .

B. War in Heaven: The Devil Expelled (12:7–12)

Comment

12:7–8 Instead of picking up chronologically where the previous passage left off, verses 7–12 provide a window into the significance of Jesus' exaltation, describing how Jesus triumphed over the Devil in his exaltation. The transcendent significance of Jesus' accomplishment is unveiled, and we learn there was a war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels (cf. Dan. 10:13, 21; 12:1; Matt. 25:41; Jude 9).²⁶ Events of earthly history are significant, but there is more to them than meets the eye—they are influenced by what takes place in heaven. Michael represents God's people in this heavenly battle, and his victory in heaven is based on Christ's triumph over the dragon on earth. John doesn't linger on the details of the battle between these angelic powers, focusing instead on how the battle ends—the dragon and his cohorts are expelled from heaven forever. When was Satan thrown out of heaven? Some identify this as the pre-fall expulsion of Satan, while others see it as an event at the end of history. Seeing this as the expulsion of Satan from heaven at the dawn of human history fits with some Jewish traditions (e.g., *Adam and Eve* 13:1–2; *2 En.* 29:4–5),²⁷ but the most plausible interpretation sees this event as occurring at Christ's death and resurrection. Jesus was snatched up to God's throne (Rev. 12:5), and the saints conquer through his blood (12:11). The "ruler of this world" is "cast out" because of the cross of Jesus Christ (John 12:31–32; cf. Luke 10:18), for Jesus' triumph came when he was lifted up on the cross and returned to God as the crucified and risen one. The decisive defeat of Satan becomes a reality through Jesus' death and resurrection.

12:9 The significance of the victory is celebrated and impressed upon John's readers. Because of the cross and resurrection, the "great dragon," the monster oppressing the people of God, no longer has the access to heaven he previously enjoyed (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; Zech. 3:1–2). In the OT, Israel's enemies were identified as Rahab (cf. Job 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Isa. 30:7; 51:9), Leviathan (cf. Job 41:1; Ps. 74:14; Isa. 27:1), or a sea monster (Ps. 74:13; Isa. 27:1; 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2). John pulls back the curtain and tells us that Satan was behind these enemies of God.

Previously, Satan could legitimately accuse believers in God's presence because of their sin, but now that sins are cleansed and forgiven through the cross, he has no grounds for accusation. He has no standing or place in the presence of God. Revelation reflects here the teaching of Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The great enemy of the people of God is identified as "that ancient serpent," revealing him to be the one who spoke to Eve in the garden and tempted her to sin (Gen. 3:1, 2, 4, 13, 14; cf. Job 26:13;

²⁶ Cf. also *1 Enoch* 20:5; 54:6; *2 Enoch* 22:6; *1QM* (Dead Sea Scrolls) 9.14–15; 17.6–8.

²⁷ Recension J of *2 Enoch*.

Ps. 91:13; Isa. 27:1; 2 Cor. 11:3; Rev. 12:14, 15; 20:2). He is also called “the Devil” (*diabolos*; Matt. 4:1; 13:39; John 8:44; Acts 10:38; Heb. 2:14), the one who slanders and accuses the people of God, and “Satan” (1 Chron. 21:1; Job 1:6–9; 2:1–7; Zech. 3:1–2; Matt. 4:10; Acts 26:18)—the great adversary and accuser of God and the saints. He is the one who deceives the entire world (cf. Rev. 20:3, 8, 10), i.e., those who refuse to believe (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:20). Nevertheless, both the dragon and his angels are thrown to earth and removed from heaven forever by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection.

12:10 A loud voice in heaven proclaims that God has now accomplished salvation. God’s kingdom has come, inaugurated through Christ’s death and resurrection. Victory over sin is not restricted to the personal or existential; there is also cosmic conflict, a heavenly war. The kingdom has invaded this present evil age through Jesus Christ, who has accomplished salvation. Since Satan has been expelled from heaven, he can no longer accuse believers, something he had done incessantly (“day and night”). Satan’s role as an accuser has a long history (cf. Job 1:9; 2:4–5; Zech. 3:1), but he no longer has a basis for his accusations, since the kingdom has come and God’s saving work has been revealed in Jesus Christ. The point of the text is more profound than Satan’s being literally locked out of heaven. The point is that he has no warrant or basis to accuse believers now that the Christ has come. God pays no heed to Satan’s accusations, since sin’s penalty has been paid by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 1:5; 7:14).

12:11 Believers conquer the dragon because of the blood of the Lamb, because of their testimony, and because they are willing to give their lives for God’s sake. The theme of conquering (cf. comment on 2:7) plays a major role in Revelation. The triumph of believers over the dragon is ascribed not to their intrinsic virtue but to the dragon’s expulsion from heaven. His accusations against them are disallowed because of the blood of the Lamb (1:5; 7:14), which has freed them from their guilt. The atoning work of Jesus is the fundamental reason Christians conquer the dragon, but they conquer also because of the “word of their testimony.” John was imprisoned because of the “testimony of Jesus” (1:9), and martyrs were slain because of their testimony (6:11; 20:4). To be a Christian is to hold to the testimony about Jesus (12:17; cf. 1:2). Believers conquer the Devil because of their adherence to the testimony about Jesus, i.e., their commitment to the gospel. Their devotion is evident in their willingness to give their lives (cf. Antipas in Rev. 2:13). Even if they are slain, they will continue to confess Jesus as their Lord.

12:12 The residents of heaven rejoice because the Devil has been thrown out of heaven (cf. Deut. 32:43; Ps. 96:11; Isa. 44:23; 49:13). Matters are dramatically different on the earth and sea, to where the raging Devil has been thrust. The Devil has no standing in heaven, but he still plays a role on earth before the kingdom comes in its fullness. The Devil’s desire is to injure and harm the people of God. He knows his time is short, as he has been defeated through Jesus’ death, resurrection, and

exaltation. The Devil's time is limited to the period between Christ's resurrection and second coming, and his complete and utter defeat is near. It is only a matter of time before his influence ends entirely, and he wants to destroy and ruin all he can in the time he has.

Response

What we see on earth, John tells us, is not all there is to reality. There is a cosmic conflict, a heavenly war, between angels and demons, between Satan and Michael. The war is won in a most unusual way: by the death and resurrection of the Christ. Satan was expelled from heaven because of the blood of the Lamb. What this means for those who belong to Christ is the removal of guilt. Satan no longer has any basis for accusing believers before God; we are free from our sins forever. Christians are free from guilt, and are free also from clinging to our own lives. We are willing to give our lives for the sake of Jesus Christ if called to do so.

REVELATION 12:13–17

¹³ And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. ¹⁴ But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. ¹⁵ The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. ¹⁶ But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. ¹⁷ Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood¹ on the sand of the sea.

¹ Some manuscripts *And I stood*, connecting the sentence with 13:1

Section Overview

The third panel in the expulsion of the dragon is now drawn. It is a mistake to read the text in a strictly chronological fashion, as if the events of Revelation 12:13–17 followed those in verses 7–12, for there is temporal overlap in the texts. Still, the text picks up in verse 13 with the dragon restricted to the earth. What will he do in his short time between Christ's resurrection and second coming? His goal is to persecute and harass the church (v. 13), but God protects his people in the wilderness and nourishes them as they are under attack (v. 14). The serpent tries

to overwhelm the church but is frustrated and thwarted (vv. 15–16). The dragon is filled with rage and continues to make war on the children of the woman, the church of Jesus Christ (v. 17).

Section Outline

VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20) . . .

C. The Woman: Persecuted and Protected (12:13–17)

Comment

12:13 The dragon realizes he is expelled from heaven and restricted to earth. His accusations against the saints no longer have any warrant, and thus he pursues and persecutes the woman (symbolizing the people of God) who gave birth to the triumphant male child.

12:14 The dragon intends to utterly destroy the woman, but his insane pursuit does not succeed because the woman receives the wings of an eagle. The Lord rescued Israel from Egypt by bearing them on the wings of an eagle (Ex. 19:4), promising to catch them on his wings and bear them on his pinions (Deut. 32:11). Just as Israel was led by the Lord into the wilderness when the dragon Pharaoh tried to destroy them, so God preserves the church while it lives in the wilderness (cf. Isa. 51:9; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2) of exile (cf. Isa. 40:27–31). John reverts back to what was said in Revelation 12:6, again emphasizing that the church will be nourished and protected during its sojourn in the wilderness. Here he specifies how long the time in the wilderness will last: “a time, and times, and half a time.” The time period equals three and one-half years, matching the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes’s (175–164 BC) persecution of Israel (Dan. 7:25). Three and one-half years is another way of speaking of 1,260 days (Rev. 12:6). As I argued in my comment on Revelation 11:2, the stretch of time here refers to the interval between Christ’s resurrection and his return. The Devil persecutes the church, but God protects and guards it.

12:15–16 The serpent tries to flood and overwhelm the woman, the people of God. Again the language is symbolic: the serpent uses persecution, deceit, false teachers, and moral depravity to overwhelm and engulf the church (cf. Pss. 18:4; 144:7–8, 11). The earth, however, opens up to swallow the flood emanating from the mouth of the dragon (cf. Num. 16:30, 32; Deut. 11:6). In other words, God provides means of escape for the church—just as he did when Israel was rescued from Egypt and the waters of the Red Sea—so that the church will not be destroyed by the serpent. The church may be rocked by false teaching and moral compromise, but it finally and ultimately stands erect and steadfast. The Devil cannot and will not win.

12:17 We could mistakenly read this verse chronologically as the *next* thing the dragon did. But John is shaking the kaleidoscope at different angles so his readers can understand the world in which they live. The Devil is enraged because

God is protecting the woman, but his work is not done. He takes off to make war against the offspring of the woman—those who faithfully keep God’s commands and uphold the testimony of Jesus (14:12). The conflict that began at the beginning of history between the offspring of the woman and the serpent does not end quickly (cf. Gen. 3:15). The offspring of the woman here represents the people of God. Does this contradict my contention that the woman also represents the people of God (cf. Rev. 12:1)? How can the offspring and the woman be the same entity? We need to recognize the apocalyptic character of what John writes; he looks at the same entity from a variety of perspectives. Thus this is a literary device that should not be pressed. Designating both the woman and the children as the people of God fits with what John does elsewhere. For instance, in 2 John 1 the “elect lady” and “her children” refer to the same entity, representing the church and its members. So too here, the offspring are the individual members of the people of God.

The dragon does not cease attacking the church; the battle is unrelenting until the final day. The dragon strategizes and contemplates victory over the church. He stands on the seashore and looks to the sea—a place of chaos and evil in Hebrew thought (cf. Rev. 21:1)—and, as we shall see in the next chapter, he summons an ally. He calls a monster from the midst of the sea to attack the offspring of the woman (cf. 11:7; 13:7).

Response

What is life like for Christians in this era of history? According to John, we face the fury of the Devil, but too often we ignore him and rarely contemplate his full-scale attack against us. Fortunately we have, as Martin Luther wrote, “the right man on our side, the man of God’s own choosing.” As Luther said, we can endure the Devil’s rage, for “One little word shall fell him.” Even now we are being protected and guarded by God, and we can be confident that we will triumph over the Evil One.

REVELATION 13:1–18

13 And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads.² And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority.³ One of its heads seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole earth marveled as they followed the beast.⁴ And they worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?”

⁵ And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. ⁶ It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling,¹ that is, those who dwell in heaven. ⁷ Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them.² And authority was given it over every tribe and people and language and nation, ⁸ and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain. ⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive,
to captivity he goes;
if anyone is to be slain with the sword,
with the sword must he be slain.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

¹¹ Then I saw another beast rising out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. ¹² It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence,³ and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed. ¹³ It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in front of people, ¹⁴ and by the signs that it is allowed to work in the presence of⁴ the beast it deceives those who dwell on earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that was wounded by the sword and yet lived. ¹⁵ And it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast might even speak and might cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain. ¹⁶ Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave,⁵ to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, ¹⁷ so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. ¹⁸ This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.⁶

¹ Or *tabernacle* ² Some manuscripts omit this sentence ³ Or *on its behalf* ⁴ Or *on behalf of* ⁵ For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface ⁶ Some manuscripts 616

Section Overview

The Devil stands on the seashore to summon the first beast from the sea to continue his war on the saints (Rev. 12:17–13:1). Chapter 13 is split into two parts, the first beast (13:1–10) and the second beast (13:11–18). The beasts are the dragon's henchmen, called forth to advance his agenda. The dragon and the two beasts constitute an unholy trinity, a parody of the true one. The first beast represents the totalitarian Roman Empire, which demanded worship of the emperor (v. 1). This beast is a combination of all four empires envisioned by Daniel (Daniel 7), and its authority and power are satanic (Rev. 13:2). The beast looks as if it is defeated, but it reemerges, to the astonishment of all (v. 3). People give their allegiance to the dragon and the beast, believing the beast to be incomparable ("Who is like the beast . . . ?"; v. 4). The beast is granted authority for the entire period between

Christ's resurrection and return, and he reviles both God and believers (vv. 5–6). Indeed, he wages war against believers and puts them to death (v. 7). Those with names not inscribed in the book of life will worship the beast (v. 8), but believers are summoned to prepare for suffering (vv. 9–10).

The second beast comes out of the earth to imitate the Lamb of God, but his speech gives him away: he belongs to the dragon (v. 11). He does signs and wonders so that people worship the first beast (vv. 12–15). He also practices economic discrimination so that people take the mark of the beast and give their lives to him (vv. 16–17). John gives the readers a riddle: the number of the beast is the number of man, i.e., the number 666 (v. 18).

Section Outline

VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20) . . .

D. Two Beasts (13:1–18)

Comment

13:1 John sees a beast rising out of the sea, summoned by the dragon on the sea-shore (12:17). The sea was a place of chaos, danger, and evil for the Hebrews (cf. comment on 21:1). The vision draws on Daniel 7:3, where Daniel sees “four great beasts . . . out of the sea.” The beasts in Daniel represent great empires, and a great empire—almost certainly Rome—is in John's mind as well. The kingdom rising out of the sea is not humane, civil, or supportive of its citizens. Instead, it is like a ravaging and ferocious beast, preying on its citizens. The beast described here is probably the fourth beast seen by Daniel (Dan. 7:7, 19, 23). The beast in Revelation has extraordinary power, for it has ten horns, with ten diadems (Rev. 17:12; cf. Dan. 7:20, 24)—symbols of ruling authority—on its horns. It has seven heads, also signifying its authority and power. The dragon had seven heads and ten horns (Rev. 12:3), and he clearly has given his authority to the beast. The beast with its horns and diadems parodies the Christ (cf. 5:6; 19:12), just as the dragon does. The seven heads bear blasphemous names, which are perhaps Roman claims to deity, such as “Lord,” “son of God,” and “Savior” (cf. also 17:3), revealing again the divine pretensions of the beast. The beast is not confined to the Roman Empire; it refers to Rome but applies also to every manifestation of evil in all governments throughout history, and also to the final conflict to come at the end.

13:2 The beast coming out of the sea is like a leopard, with feet like a bear's and a mouth like a lion's. In Daniel's vision of the four beasts, the first (Babylon) was like a lion with eagles' wings (Dan. 7:4), the second (Medio-Persia) was like a bear (Dan. 7:5), and the third (probably Greece) was like a leopard (Dan. 7:6). John sees these beasts consummated in Daniel's fourth beast, which is the beast he describes here (probably Rome; cf. Dan. 7:7, 19, 23). This beast is not autonomous but derives its totalitarian rule from the dragon, and thus its governing authority is demonic (cf. 2 Thess. 2:8–9).

13:3 One of the heads of the beast had a mortal wound, from which it recovered (cf. 17:8). Many understand this to refer to an individual, which is certainly possible. After Nero's death in AD 68, a tradition arose that he would return (perhaps from Parthia) and rule again, and John might have had that tradition in mind. But if John wrote in the 90s, his most plausible date, it is quite unlikely this tradition would be in mind, since Nero was long gone. It is more probable, then, that the reference is to the empire as a whole. The deadly wound signifies the apparent demise of tyrannical rule. Rome's dominion looks as if it has been dethroned and removed forever. And yet the empire is not destroyed; just when it seems that its tyranny has ended, its power is resumed. The so-called death-blow is ineffective. In response, the world is astonished with the beast and gives its allegiance to him, for the revival of a demonic empire is a kind of resurrection, and so once again the beast parodies the Christ.

13:4 The staying power of the beast and its empire leads to worship of the dragon and the beast. The dragon is worshiped for giving authority to the beast. The beast is worshiped because of his so-called resurrection. He is considered incomparable and omnipotent, like God (cf. Ex. 15:11; Ps. 89:7). People worship the beast, believing he cannot be resisted or overcome. As has often been observed in history, people support a winner.

13:5 Twice in this verse we are told what “was given” to the beast: a mouth to utter proud, blasphemous words, and authority for forty-two months. The clause “it was given” (*edothē*) appears four other times in this chapter (13:7 [2x], 14, 15). In the comment on 9:1, I defended the notion that God is the implied subject of this passive construction. Although the dragon actively gives (*edōken*; 13:2, 4) his authority to the beast, God reigns and rules over what the beast carries out, allowing or permitting the beast to exercise his authority. Even though God ordains what the beast does, he does not have the same motivations or intent as Satan. God's judgment is his “strange” work (Isa. 28:21), and he calls on the wicked to repent and live (Ezek. 18:23, 32), while Satan rejoices when people are destroyed. The “secret things” belong to the Lord (Deut. 29:29), and hence we cannot fully chart or explicate the logical relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

The beast is full of himself, uttering “haughty and blasphemous words” against God, just as Antiochus IV Epiphanes did in his day, functioning as a type of the coming beast (cf. Dan. 7:8, 20; 11:36). Such activity fits also with the “man of lawlessness,” who exalts himself as divine (2 Thess. 2:3–4). The beast is allowed to exercise his authority for forty-two months. Some understand this to be a literal three and one-half years before Jesus returns. But John is more likely describing the entire period between Jesus' first and second coming (cf. comment on Rev. 11:2); John wrote not of days far removed from his readers but of the impact of the Roman Empire on them. All totalitarian governments arrogating to themselves divine authority reveal that they too are the beast.

13:6 John focuses on the beast's opposition to God, drawing especially on Daniel. As in verse 5, the beast's self-exaltation expresses itself in his speech, which blasphemes God and his name. He follows the pattern of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, of whom Daniel 7:25 says, "He shall speak words against the Most High." The prophecy of Daniel 11:36 is also fulfilled: "He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods." The beast also reviles God's dwelling, those who dwell in heaven (cf. Rev. 12:12). This is likely a reference to the people of God (21:3), showing that their true home is in heaven. The actions of the beast here accord with Daniel 7:25, where the beast opposes God and his people. The beast, harboring divine pretensions, hates anything and anyone devoted to the one true and living God.

13:7 Twice more we see what God has given (*edothē*) the beast. First, God has allowed him to make war on the saints and conquer them. This does not mean the saints surrender their faith (cf. comment on 11:7). It means God allows the beast to take their lives (cf. 2:13; 6:9–11; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4); this too follows the pattern found in Daniel, where Daniel says about Antiochus IV Epiphanes, "This horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them" (Dan. 7:21; cf. Dan. 7:25). God grants the desires of the beast for a period of time, so that the beast exercises authority over every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. We see here the reach of the imperial cult and the totalitarian nature of the beast's rule.

13:8 The beast's authority and rule spark fear and admiration in those dwelling on earth, and they worship the beast. The verse reads as if everyone without exception worships the beast, but the phrase "all who dwell on earth" (*pantes hoi katoikountes epī tēs gēs*) is a technical term in Revelation for unbelievers (cf. comment on 3:10). Such an understanding is confirmed by the next clause, for the earth dwellers are those with names not inscribed in the book of life. The book of life contains the names of those who will not perish in the lake of fire (cf. Dan. 12:1; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27; 22:19). Those who give their allegiance to the beast thereby demonstrate that they do not belong to the one true God.

Most English translations refer to those "written before the foundation of the world in the book of life." John makes a similar point in Revelation 17:8, where he refers to "the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." The word order in 13:8 could suggest, alternatively, that John refers to "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (cf. KJV, NIV). Word order is not determinative, and, given the parallels, John probably speaks of those who were inscribed in the book of life before history began. After all, the death of Christ was *predetermined* before history began, but it is quite another thing to say he was actually *slain* before the world began, for the Lamb was slain in history, not before the world began. On the other hand, God decided before history began who would be inscribed in the book of life.

13:9–10 John reverts to the formula used in all seven letters (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Those who have ears should open their ears and heed what is being said. People are told in advance about the authority of the beast and his persecution and slaying of Christians. They are informed that unbelievers will give to the beast their worship and their adoration. Hence, believers must ready themselves. Some are destined for captivity, and to captivity they will go. Others are destined to be killed by the sword, and so it will be (cf. Jer. 15:2; 43:11). Such events do not mean God has abandoned or forgotten about them; the power of the beast does not suggest God's sovereign rule over the world has been surrendered, for the beast exercises authority only by God's will. Hence, believers are called upon to persevere and remain faithful to their Lord. They must remain loyal despite the persecution and difficulties at hand.

13:11 The next paragraph (13:11–18) commences with John seeing another beast, coming up from the earth. This other beast is elsewhere identified as the “false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The second beast, then, claims to speak for God and thus represents religious authority contrary to God's Word and ways. If the first beast is the Roman Empire, the second beast is probably the imperial priesthood. The deceitfulness of the second beast is apparent—he has two horns like a Lamb, thus presenting himself as being in accord with the Lamb, but he actually speaks like the dragon, revealing his message to be demonic. Jesus himself warned that false prophets would come “in sheep's clothing” while in fact being “ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15).

13:12 The second beast is the third member of the unholy trinity, functioning like an unholy Spirit. He exercises the authority of the first beast in his presence, compelling the inhabitants of the earth (all unbelievers; cf. comment on 3:10) to worship the beast. Unbelievers are happy to comply, for the beast appeared to have divine powers, recovering from a seemingly mortal wound. The beast, in other words, had its own version of the resurrection—just when totalitarian rule appeared to be squelched, it rose from the ashes to reign again.

13:13 The plausibility of the second beast is augmented by its miraculous power (cf. 16:14). In other words, false religion seems to be verified empirically. Just as Elijah could bring fire down from heaven (1 Kings 18:38), so false religion here is allegedly confirmed by signs and wonders. Both Jesus (Matt. 24:24) and Paul (2 Thess. 2:9) taught that miracles would be accomplished by false christs and prophets. Such miracles test believers, ascertaining their devotion to the Lord (Deut. 13:1–3).

13:14 The signs deceive the earth dwellers (unbelievers; cf. comment on 3:10), convincing them that the beast is worthy of worship and praise. Hence, the inhabitants of the earth make an image of the beast. Images were crafted for the sake of worship, and John reminds us again that the beast is worshiped because it seemed to be dead but sprung to life again. “Image” does not mean a literal image of the

beast is made but is John's apocalyptic and symbolic way of saying the beast is worshiped. "Lived" (*ezēsen*) is used elsewhere of the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 14:9; Rev. 2:8) and the plural "They came to life" (*ezēsan*) refers elsewhere to the spiritual or physical resurrection of believers (20:4–5). Unbelievers worship the beast because of its resurrection power, because the empire seems dead but keeps springing back to life. The beast, then, is a parody and counterfeit of Christ.

13:15 We see again that the second beast functions like the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit came to glorify Jesus (John 16:14) and anoint him with power (Luke 4:18–21), so the second beast honors and empowers the first. When John describes it granting life to the image of the beast, we should not envisage an image literally coming to life. Instead, the point is the second beast's empowering and supporting the first beast in its endeavors. The speech of the first beast seems supernatural, inspired, authoritative, compelling; he speaks in oracles. But this is not a matter merely of persuasion. Coercion is a staple of the second beast's "ministry," and those who refuse to worship the first beast are put to death. Similarly, Pliny writes to the emperor Trajan (AD 98–117) about what to do with Christians: he ought not punish them if they sacrifice to the gods (*Epistulae* 10.96.5 LCL), but if they refuse, they are to be put to death. Such absolute allegiance was demanded also by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 3:5–6). Those who bow before the beast reveal they do not belong to the one true God (cf. Rev. 14:9–11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4).

13:16–17 The second beast also enforces the power of the first through economic discrimination. No one, no matter his social class or influence, will be able to buy or sell unless he has a mark upon the forehead or hand to signify devotion to the beast. The number signifies the name of the beast (cf. 14:11; 15:2). Many interpreters take this literally, as if a literal mark will be imprinted in some fashion on foreheads and hands, but the language is likely symbolic. Just as the seal on the foreheads of the 144,000 (7:3) is not literal, neither should this mark be understood literally. In any case, the two beasts conspire to exclude believers from the marketplace.

13:18 John closes this section with a statement that has fascinated and puzzled interpreters throughout history. He summons the readers to be wise so that they can calculate the number of the beast. We are told the number is the number of a man: 666. Some manuscripts read 616, but the best reading is 666. If the number refers to a particular individual, the best guess is Nero. If "Nero Caesar" is transliterated from Greek to Hebrew, the letters calculate to 666, though it is doubtful the original audience would have understood this complex solution. Many wild speculations about the identity of the person have been promoted throughout history, and every guess has so far been wrong. The advantage of seeing a reference to Nero is that he fits the time period in which John wrote, at which time there was speculation and fear that Nero would return from Parthia after his death. Still, seeing a reference to Nero isn't easy or obvious, for one must transliterate from Greek to Hebrew to get the number 666, which seems like a stretch for the audience. Also,

as noted earlier, if Revelation was written in the 90s, fear of Nero's return would have lessened considerably by that time. Perhaps it is better to move in a different direction. The number 777 represents perfection, but John says 666 is the number of a man. The number 666, then, represents what is anti-god and antichrist, all that is in opposition to the one true God. If 777 represents holiness and perfect goodness, then 666 signifies the enormity and totality of evil. Hence, John does not intend to point to any particular individual here. Rather, the kingdom of the beast is a human kingdom, an evil kingdom, instead of a divine one. The nature of humanity apart from God is demonic. The kingdom of the beast promises life and prosperity but brings death, misery, and devastation.

Response

The totalitarian state is a beast, an antichrist. The state tends toward absolutism, desiring complete control over its citizens, even their worship and allegiance. We have seen manifestations of this throughout history, such as the rule of Napoleon and Hitler or the rise of communism in the Soviet Union and China. In John's day, the Roman Empire was a beast that demanded total allegiance and worship from Christians. And just when it seems totalitarianism might be defeated once and for all, another such state arises. Christians are called upon to resist. We must be willing to suffer, to give our all for Christ, to persevere until the end in order to obtain the final reward.

REVELATION 14:1–5

14 Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ²And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. ⁴It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

Section Overview

The scene shifts from earth to heaven, from the reign of the two beasts on earth to the reign of the Father and the Lamb in heaven. In the heavenly Mount Zion described in Revelation 14:1, we see the 144,000 with the names of the Lamb and

the Father on their foreheads, in contrast to those in 13:16–18 who had the mark of the beast on their heads and hands. The 144,000 redeemed believers are singing a song of praise to God for their redemption and salvation (14:2–3). They belong on the heavenly Mount Zion, for they did not defile themselves by worshiping false gods but followed the Lamb unswervingly (v. 4). They did not subscribe to the lie of false worship and never gave their allegiance to the beast. Because they worshiped the Lamb and the Father, they are blameless (v. 5).

Section Outline

VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20) . . .

E. The 144,000 on Mount Zion (14:1–5)

Comment

14:1 The scene shifts, and John sees something new and distinct in his vision. Instead of the two beasts, he looks and sees Mount Zion, which here refers not to the historical location in Jerusalem but to the heavenly Zion, to heaven itself. In the OT, Mount Zion plays a prominent role in the coming end-time kingdom (cf. Isa. 24:23; Joel 2:32; Mic. 4:7–8; cf. also *4 Ezra* 13:29–39; *5 Ezra* 2:42–48; *2 Bar.* 4:1–5). John in his vision has been transported from earth to heaven, and he sees the Lamb and the 144,000 with him. The Lamb’s standing posture indicates he is risen and is reigning as the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16; cf. 17:14). Ultimately, the beast’s rule will not be sustained. And thus the 144,000 will receive the reward promised to them and will dwell in the heavenly Zion. In Hebrews, the heavenly Zion is equated with the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), and Revelation is likely making the same point (Rev. 3:12; 21:2, 10). I argued in the comment on 7:4–8 that the 144,000 stand for the people of God, all those who are redeemed. Here they have the names of the Lamb and the Father imprinted on their foreheads (cf. 3:12; 22:4). Because of the parallel with the mark of the beast, this provides further evidence that the mark of the beast is not to be understood as a literal mark. This mark signifies that the 144,000 belong to the Lamb and the Father; the Lamb and the Father claim the 144,000 as theirs, for they are identified with them.

14:2 John doesn’t just see 144,000 on the heavenly Mount Zion—he hears from heaven a roar like a cascading waterfall and crackling thunder (cf. 19:6). This is not the voice of God (cf. Ezek. 1:24; 43:2; Rev. 1:15) but appears to come from the 144,000; the sound is like harpists playing their instruments. John does not say harpists *were* playing their harps but that the sound was *like* (*hōs*) harpists’ playing. In other words, John is not saying we will spend eternity playing harps. Harps and music symbolize joy and gladness (cf. Pss. 33:2; 43:4; 57:8; 98:5; 147:7), capturing, perhaps more profoundly than anything else can, the depths of joy swelling in the human heart; thus the resounding roar here is the sound of joy pulsating through heaven (cf. Rev. 19:1, 6).

14:3 The 144,000 are singing a new song in the presence of God, who sits on the throne, and of the four living creatures and the elders. It is striking that the four living creatures and the elders are distinguished from the 144,000, suggesting again that the twenty-four elders are angelic (cf. comment on 4:4). In Scripture, a new song is sung in response to a fresh act of deliverance (cf. Pss. 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9; 149:1; Isa. 42:10; cf. also comment on 5:9). The 144,000 are singing because they are “redeemed from the earth,” looking forward eschatologically in this vision to their future residence in heaven prior to the resurrection of the body. The redemption, as Revelation 5:9 indicates, was won by the blood of the Lamb, and the redeemed are full of praise and thunderous joy because of what the Lamb has done on their behalf. No one apart from the 144,000 is able to learn this song—only those who are redeemed, those who are saved, can learn it. Those who identify with the beast cannot learn the song, for they have thrown in their lot with those who are evil. Since John says the redeemed learn the song, we have a strong argument here for saying that the 144,000 represent all believers, since believers by definition are those who are redeemed.

14:4 Three descriptions are given of the 144,000. They are virgins undefiled by women; they follow the Lamb everywhere; they are redeemed as the firstfruits. First, we are told they are undefiled by women—they are virgins. Clearly the language is symbolic here, for John is not saying sexual relations defile inherently. Indeed, those who claim that marriage defiles spread the teaching of demons (1 Tim. 4:1, 3). The thought, then, is similar to Paul’s, who says to the Corinthians that he “betrothed” them to “one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2). In the OT, the people of God are portrayed as the bride of Yahweh and are indicted for harlotry for giving their allegiance to other gods (cf. Jer. 3:8–9; Ezekiel 16; 23; Hos. 1:1–3:5). The 144,000—the people of God in the heavenly Mount Zion—have not committed adultery with other gods. They have remained loyal to the one true God. The second statement, then, is similar to the first. To follow the Lamb means to be obedient to him, to listen to and heed the voice of the Good Shepherd, as John says in his Gospel (John 10:4, 8, 16, 27).

Finally, the 144,000 are the redeemed among humanity; they are those who are ransomed and delivered by the Lamb’s blood (Rev. 5:9). What does John mean in calling them the firstfruits of God and the Lamb? Does he mean the 144,000 are saved first, with more being saved later on? “Firstfruits” designates the first part of the crop, anticipating the full harvest to come (cf. Ex. 23:19; Lev. 2:12; 23:10; Num. 18:12; Deut. 18:1–4; 26:2, 10; Neh. 10:37, 39). It is doubtful the term always carries the notion of more to follow, as if there were other believers apart from the 144,000 to be redeemed. John has already told us the 144,000 are the redeemed from those on earth (Rev. 14:3), so he likely means they are specially devoted to God. If there is any idea of further blessing, it would be the renewal of all creation, not the salvation of others in the future beyond the 144,000 (cf. James 1:18). The 144,000 refer to all of the redeemed, to all believers (cf. comment on Rev. 7:4–8).

14:5 The last description of the 144,000 is of their blamelessness: they do not lie. Of course, those who belong to the people of God do not make a practice of lying, but I would suggest here that John is not focused on the literal practice of lying, just as he is not speaking of literal singleness in verse 4. In the OT, devotion to idols is described as lying (cf. Ps. 4:2; Isa. 28:15, 17; Jer. 3:23; Hos. 11:12). Isaiah ridicules the idolatry of his day, saying about the idolater, “He feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, ‘Is there not a lie in my right hand?’” (Isa. 44:20). The lie in his right hand is the idol. Thus the 144,000 are blameless (cf. Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:22; Jude 24) because they refuse to consort with idols. They stay faithful to God even when persecuted.

Response

We are promised indescribable joy in heaven, a joy we can anticipate now when listening to music that transports us. The sufferings of the present time, as Paul says (Rom. 8:18), cannot compare to the glory we shall experience in eternity. And that glory, that splendor, spills over with joy, with a new song that will never get old. We will sing the song of our redemption forever. And we will be on the heavenly Mount Zion if we have not given ourselves to spiritual prostitution, if we have listened to and followed the Lamb who is our Good Shepherd, if we have not listened to the lie that claims other gods can satisfy us.

REVELATION 14:6–13

⁶Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

⁸Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion¹ of her sexual immorality.”

⁹And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”

¹²Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.²

¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

¹ Or *wrath* ² Greek *and the faith of Jesus*

Section Overview

The scene shifts again, and in these verses John sees three angels making declarations. The first angel proclaims an eternal gospel to all people, saying that all must fear God and give him glory because the judgment is at hand (Rev. 14:6–7). The second angel proclaims the fall of Babylon because of her influence on the nations (14:8), a theme picked up in 17:1–19:5. The third angel threatens those who receive the mark of the beast with the wrath of God and eternal torment (14:9–11). In light of these declarations, the saints are called to persevere and keep God’s commands (14:12), knowing there will be great blessing and wonderful rest for them after death (14:13).

Section Outline

VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20) . . .

F. Three Angels (14:6–13)

Comment

14:6 The scene shifts from heaven to the skies. John uses the term “middle heaven” (*mesouranēma*), translated “overhead” here, to denote the skies above earth (8:13; 19:17). The first of three angels enters the scene with a message, an eternal gospel to proclaim to all those who dwell on the earth (*epi tous kathēmenous epi tēs gēs*). Significantly, this time John does not use the phrase “earth dwellers” (*hoi katoikountes epi tēs gēs*; cf. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 12, 14; 17:2, 8), a technical term for unbelievers (cf. comment on 3:10). Here he speaks of a gospel for all people, a gospel for those from every people group, tribe, language, and nation (cf. Matt. 24:14). “Gospel” suggests the message of salvation is intended here, but, at the same time, those who do not embrace the gospel will be judged.

14:7 The angel calls all people without exception to fear God and give him glory (cf. 15:4; cf. also Jer. 13:16). Giving God praise and glory as the creator of heaven and earth (cf. Acts 4:24) is the fundamental requirement of human beings (cf. Rom. 1:21). Some interpreters argue that the giving of glory here refers to the homage rendered by the unconverted when, at the last day, they are compelled to worship the Lord (cf. Phil. 2:9–11). They question whether response to the gospel is in view here, since nothing is said about Jesus Christ. Still, it seems preferable to see a reference to salvation here. John is not required to say everything in every text, and the remainder of Revelation makes clear that one cannot fear God or give him glory unless one worships the Lamb and honors him. We also see, a number

of times in Revelation, that giving God glory is an activity of the saints (15:4; 16:9; 19:5). All human beings are summoned to fear God and give him glory, for the time of judgment has drawn near, and those who do not honor and worship him will be punished.

14:8 Another angel appears, declaring that Babylon the great has fallen. The fall of Babylon was prophesied by Isaiah (Isa. 21:9) and Jeremiah (Jer. 51:8) and fulfilled in 539 BC. John applies the description of Babylon to Rome (cf. comments on Rev. 17:1–19:5; 1 Pet. 5:13), showing that Babylon functions as a precursor and type of godless cities to come. John will expand significantly on the angel's words in 17:1–19:5, but here he declares Babylon's fall (cf. 18:2, 10, 21). Babylon is judged for making the nations drink the wine of her fornication (16:19; 17:2, 5; 18:3). This fornication is spiritual and not literal, though it surely includes the idea of sexual sin. Still, the focus is on spiritual harlotry and prostitution (cf. Jer. 3:8–9; Ezekiel 16; 23; Hos. 1:1–3:5). Babylon will face judgment for encouraging the worship of false gods, spreading worldwide the message that it is good and right to rebel against the one true God.

14:9 The third angel now arrives on the scene to make a worldwide declaration in a loud voice. In every instance, the angels proclaim that one must worship the true God instead of false gods. Here the angel addresses those who give their worship to the beast (the Roman Empire) and his image and receive the mark of the beast on their forehead and hand. We know from 13:16–17 that they receive the mark for economic reasons, to flourish in contemporary society. But accepting the mark is not merely an economic decision; it reflects their highest allegiance, showing that Rome and all its glittering wealth and power are more important to them than God.

14:10 The warning is remarkably intense. Those who worship the beast or receive the mark will drink the cup of the wine of God's wrath (cf. 16:19), an expression used often in the OT of God's punishment on those who rebel against him (Ps. 75:8; Isa. 51:17, 22; Jer. 25:15). Indeed, those who rebel will experience God's wrath in an undiluted form; they will not be spared or shown mercy. God pours out his wrath on them, and they experience torment and anguish from fire and sulfur (cf. Rev. 19:20; 20:10; 21:8; cf. Gen. 19:24; Ps. 11:6; Ezek. 38:22). The language of fire and sulfur need not be literal, but in any case the suffering brings anguish and agony as people suffer before the holy angels and the Lamb.

14:11 John continues to elaborate on their punishment. The smoke of their torment never ends (19:3; cf. also Isa. 34:10). Some take this smoke to mean they are annihilated, ceasing to exist, but this contradicts both the experience of torment in verse 10 and the very next line in verse 11, where John says they have no rest day or night. In other words, their experience of torment continues perpetually. Such a portrait of the final judgment fits Matthew 25:46, where the righteous enjoy "eternal life" but the wicked face "eternal punishment" (cf. also Matt. 25:41).

Readers are warned that terrible suffering will forever ensue if they worship the beast and its image, or receive its mark.

14:12 The remarkably strong warning in verses 9–11 is not written for unbelievers, for John did not write the book for them. It is addressed to believers (“the saints”) and is intended to provoke them to persevere until the end. If they give their allegiance to the beast, they will suffer forever and ever. Hence, the warning in verses 9–11 and the message of the first two angels (vv. 6–8) calls John’s audience to endurance and perseverance (cf. 13:10). Endurance is explained further in terms of keeping God’s commands and continuing to put faith in Jesus (cf. 12:17). The reality of their faith will reveal itself in observable and concrete ways—those who endure follow God in obedience.

14:13 A heavenly voice then speaks, summing up in many ways the message of the chapter thus far, and indeed the book as a whole. John is supposed to record the ensuing message because of its importance. Believers are called to endure in a world fiercely opposed to them. But this world as it is now is not their home, and thus those who die in the Lord are blessed. They leave the struggles of this world behind (cf. Rev. 6:11; Heb. 4:9–10), exchanging them for their final reward. The Spirit reaffirms the blessing of death: believers rest from the toils marking this present evil age. They will then experience relief from the pressures impinging upon them in life. Believers will rest, John says, because their works follow them. In other words, their works testify that they belong to God, and thus the rest given them is warranted.

Response

We are reminded here most emphatically that judgment is coming, our lives will be assessed, and those who have turned away from God will be tormented perpetually. Hence, above all else, believers must continue to hold on, keep believing, and keep persevering no matter how difficult their circumstances. Life on earth is a battle and a struggle, but it will not last forever. Indeed, even though death is the last enemy, it is also a friend, for those who die in the Lord are blessed. At death our trials and stresses and troubles are over, and we will find joy in God’s presence. As the old spiritual says, “All my trials, Lord, will soon be over.”

REVELATION 14:14–20

¹⁴Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” ¹⁶So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

¹⁷Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” ¹⁹So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. ²⁰And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for 1,600 stadia.¹

¹About 184 miles; a *stadium* was about 607 feet or 185 meters

Section Overview

The visions of chapters 12–14 end with two harvests. John again divides humanity into two groups: those who are saved (Rev. 14:14–16) and those who will be judged (vv. 17–20). The first harvest is the work of the Son of Man, who has a sickle in his hand to harvest the earth (v. 14). An angel instructs him to complete the harvest (v. 15), and he does so and reaps the earth (v. 16). This harvest could refer to judgment, but it more likely refers to salvation. For the second harvest, another angel comes with a sharp sickle (v. 17), and this harvest is definitely one of judgment. Still another angel tells him to gather the vintage from the grape harvest (v. 18). The angel swings his sickle, and the grape harvest is thrown into the winepress of God’s wrath (v. 19). The blood from the winepress is so plentiful that it reaches as high as a horse’s bridle (v. 20).

Section Outline

- VI. Signs in Heaven and on Earth (12:1–14:20) . . .
- G. Two Harvests (14:14–20)

Comment

14:14 John’s visions continue, and he sees a white cloud with one like a son of man seated on it. Identifying this figure is difficult. The reference may be to an angel,

since the son of man receives a command from an angel (v. 15), and in Matthew angels harvest the earth (Matt. 13:39). However, the title does not bring angels to mind, and John could have easily identified him as such, as with the other angels in this section (cf. Rev. 14:15, 17, 18, 19). A reference to Jesus as the Son of Man seems most probable, for earlier in the book (1:12–16) the title clearly refers to Jesus, whom the NT elsewhere describes as the final judge (e.g., Matt. 25:31–46). In Daniel, “one like a son of man” comes with the clouds of heaven to the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7:13). Jesus as the Son of Man will return “with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). Here he is seated on a white cloud, suggesting his rule and reign (cf. Ps. 110:1; Mark 14:62). His golden crown signifies the purity and excellence of his reign, while the sickle is used for harvesting.

14:15–16 An angel emerges from the temple, symbolizing God’s very presence, and calls the Son of Man to put in his sickle and reap the ripe harvest. The harvest could stand for judgment of the wicked (cf. Joel 3:13; Matt. 13:39), but it probably represents the salvation of those who belong to the Lord, a meaning well-attested in the NT (Matt. 9:37–38; 13:30; Mark 4:29; Luke 10:2; John 4:35). Nothing is said of negative ramifications for the harvest, which we would expect if the harvest signified judgment of the wicked. The Son of Man swings his sickle and the earth is reaped. The full harvest of the people of God is completed, and God’s purposes in saving a great multitude are accomplished (cf. Rev. 7:9–17).

14:17 For the second harvest, another angel comes out of the temple in heaven. The reference to the temple in heaven again points to the presence of God, for there is no physical temple in heaven. This angel also has a sickle sharpened for harvest.

14:18 Another angel comes from the altar, with “authority over the fire.” The altar is probably the altar of incense, and the reference to fire fits with 8:5, where an angel fills his censer with fire and throws it to earth. The harvest here clearly represents judgment. The second angel summons the first angel with the sickle to begin the grape harvest.

14:19–20 When the angel swings his sickle, the vintage of the earth is gathered in, but this is a most unusual harvest, for the grapes are thrown into the winepress of God’s wrath. In the OT, treading a winepress is an image of God’s judgment (Isa. 63:2–3; Lam. 1:15; Joel 3:13). We have here a picture of final judgment, and the scene is gory indeed. The blood of those judged flows as high as the bridles of horses, like a river, for 1,600 stadia (about 200 miles/320 km). This river of blood vividly captures the judgment to be poured out on those who side with the unholy trinity of the dragon, beast, and false prophet.

Response

God’s purposes will be realized and his kingdom will come. Those he intends to save will be harvested and brought into the kingdom forever. Those who are

wicked and pursue evil will not escape judgment. Final salvation and judgment can seem unreal during our present lives, so John reminds us repeatedly that the last day is coming and summons us to be ready.

REVELATION 15:1–8

15 Then I saw another sign in heaven, great and amazing, seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is finished.

²And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. ³And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

“Great and amazing are your deeds,

O Lord God the Almighty!

Just and true are your ways,

O King of the nations!¹

⁴ Who will not fear, O Lord,

and glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come

and worship you,

for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

⁵After this I looked, and the sanctuary of the tent² of witness in heaven was opened, ⁶and out of the sanctuary came the seven angels with the seven plagues, clothed in pure, bright linen, with golden sashes around their chests. ⁷And one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever, ⁸and the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the sanctuary until the seven plagues of the seven angels were finished.

¹Some manuscripts *the ages* ²Or *tabernacle*

Section Overview

Chapters 15–16 of Revelation belong together and move the reader in a new direction. We have seen John taking snapshots of history leading to the consummation, in what can be called recursive parallelism. Chapters 15–16 fit with such a pattern, as John brings the readers to the end of history again by rehearsing the judgment of God. The focus in these chapters, however, is on God’s judgments and

the plagues he pours out on the wicked, and the plagues and judgments inflicted on Egypt become the pattern for what God will finally do to those who reject him. Chapter 15 begins with John seeing another sign in heaven, where seven angels hold the seven last plagues with which God will consummate his wrath (Rev. 15:1). The scene shifts to the redeemed, to the throne room of God and the sea of glass, and those who have triumphed over the beast have harps of praise (v. 2). Like the Israelites during the exodus, they sing the song of Moses, for they have been delivered, as Israel was, by God's great saving acts (vv. 3–4). The song of Moses has reached its apogee in the song of the Lamb, and those saved by the Lamb are rescued while those resisting him are judged. Thus all nations will worship God for his holiness and righteousness.

The sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven is opened (v. 5), and John is in the very presence of God. Seven angels come out of the sanctuary with seven plagues (v. 6), and the four living creatures give them seven bowls full of God's wrath (v. 7) as the sanctuary is filled with the smoke of God's glory. No one can enter the sanctuary until the angels finish pouring out the seven plagues on the earth (v. 8).

Section Outline

VII. The Seven Bowls from the Sanctuary (15:1–16:21)

A. The Sanctuary and the Song (15:1–8)

Comment

15:1 John now sees another marvelous and amazing sign in heaven (cf. 12:1, 3), described as such because of the wonder and fear engendered by God's sanctuary. He sees seven angels with the seven last plagues. "Plagues" echoes the judgments poured out on Egypt (Exodus 7–12) and other judgments of the Lord directed against those who turned away from him (Lev. 26:21; Num. 11:33; 25:8–9; Deut. 28:59, 61). The plagues here are the "last" ones, in which God's wrath reaches its consummation. It seems, then, that the bowl judgments, although they overlap in part with the seal (Rev. 6:1–17; 8:1–5) and trumpet judgments (8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), focus on the end of history, on the final and climactic judgments God pours out on humans. It may be that all seven of these bowl judgments describe from various angles the nature of the last judgment.

15:2 Earlier we saw a sea of glass like crystal before God's throne (4:6; cf. Ezek. 1:22). Here John sees a sea of glass mixed with fire. This probably signifies the gulf between human beings and God, for the sea represents chaos and destruction in Hebrew thought (cf. comment on Rev. 21:1). Approaching him is like walking on a beautiful sea of glass, but the sea burns with fire! Nevertheless, the saints are standing without harm on the sea of glass, as the preposition *epi* here probably means "on" (so NKJV, CSB), not "beside" (ESV, NRSV, NIV). They are not consumed by God's holy and awesome presence. Instead, they carry harps (cf. comment on 14:2) to praise God for his deliverance and salvation. They stand before

God because they have conquered the beast, the image (13:14–15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4), and the number of his name (13:16–17). Conquering, as we have seen, is one of the major themes in the book (cf. Introduction). Only those who conquer can stand on the glassy sea before God’s throne. Ultimately, the saints triumph on the basis of the blood of the Lamb (12:11), which washed them clean from their sins (7:14).

15:3 Those who have conquered the beast and stand before God’s throne on the glassy sea have harps and sing the song of Moses, God’s servant (Num. 12:7; Deut. 34:5; Josh. 1:2, 7), and the song of the Lamb. When Israel was delivered from Pharaoh and Egypt, she sang with triumph and joy (cf. Ex. 15:1–18) because of her salvation and the judgment poured out on the Egyptians. The sea designates evil and chaos (Rev. 13:1; 21:1), but Jesus has conquered the forces opposing God. The deliverance under Moses anticipated and pointed forward to the greater redemption accomplished by the Lamb. Hence, the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb are genetically related, since the promises made to Moses are finally and ultimately fulfilled in the salvation accomplished by the Lamb. Likewise, the exodus from Egypt points forward to the redemption, the exodus from sin, accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The saints sing because they are saved, while their enemies are judged. The saints exult in God’s “great and amazing . . . deeds.” The word “great” is often used of God’s saving work on behalf of his people (cf. Deut. 10:21; 11:7; Pss. 106:21; 111:2; 135:5) and reflects God’s saving work at the exodus. Similarly, words like “amazing” and “awesome” are used of God’s saving his people in the exodus (cf. Ex. 34:10; Ps. 106:22; cf. also Mic. 7:15); God is truly “awesome in glorious deeds” (Ex. 15:11). Believers are full of praise for the new exodus, the climactic act of redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ.

The connection between Revelation 15:3 and Psalm 98:1 is clear: “Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him” (Ps. 98:1). Here we see three themes that match Revelation 15:3: singing, God’s amazing work, and salvation. God’s salvation of his people is inseparable from his judging the wicked and rescuing the saints from their baleful influence. He is able to save and judge because he is Almighty God (Rev. 11:17; cf. Amos 3:13; 4:13), the “King of the nations” (cf. Jer. 10:7). His “ways” are “just and true.” Revelation 15:3 also reflects the Greek of Deuteronomy 32:4, which declares that God’s “works are true and all his ways are just” (AT; cf. also Ps. 145:17).

15:4 God’s plan for the world, including his judgment and salvation, is awesome. When people see God’s work in saving and judging, they fear him and give glory to his great and awesome name. They recognize God alone as holy (cf. Deut. 32:4), utterly unique and distinct from anything in creation, in a category by himself. Hence, “all nations” will come to worship and bow down before the one true God (cf. Ps. 86:9; Jer. 16:19; Mal. 1:11). John may include unbelievers here, for all will

acknowledge God as the Lord of the world, even if they hate him and reject him (Phil. 2:9–11). God's deity will be recognized in his righteous acts, and his righteousness is displayed in both judgment and salvation, for God always does what is right and true and good. Alternatively, "all nations" may refer to believers from every nation, and thus the reference is not to every single person in the world without exception but to believers from every nation without distinction.

15:5 John then sees the sanctuary of the tent of witness opened in heaven. Here we have a scene of heaven itself, of the very presence of God, for the sanctuary of the tent of witness is a symbolic way of designating God's dwelling place. The opening of the sanctuary signifies that judgment is at hand and God's kingdom is coming. The parallel in 11:19, which records the sounding of the seventh trumpet at the arrival of Christ's kingdom, verifies this: "God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail." The opening of God's temple means judgment is at hand.

15:6 Seven angels with seven plagues emerge from God's sanctuary. These judgments were anticipated in the plagues Israel faced for its disobedience (Lev. 26:21) and the plagues Egypt experienced. The angels are glorious and powerful, coming from God's very presence. They wear "pure, bright linen" and have "golden sashes around their chests." The description has some similarities to the glorious angel who appeared to Daniel (Dan. 10:5) and to the vision of the Son of Man (Rev. 1:13), confirming the glory and goodness of these angels and their connection with the Son of Man.

15:7 The seven angels hold the seven plagues, but now the four living creatures before God's throne (4:6) give seven golden bowls to the angels. These bowls are containers of the wrath of God (cf. 14:10; 16:1; 17:1; 21:9). The seven plagues will be poured out on unbelievers in the way bowls turned upside down spill their contents on the ground. Perhaps John notes that God lives forever in order to certify that his purposes and designs will come to pass. He is the everlasting one, and thus he will outlive the period in which evil seems to triumph.

15:8 Before the judgments strike, the temple is filled with smoke from the glory and power of God, just as in Isaiah the temple filled with smoke because of the holiness of God (Isa. 6:3–4). In the OT, when the Lord first came down to dwell in the tabernacle or temple, Moses and the priests could not stand in his presence because of the splendor and greatness of his glory (Ex. 40:34–35; cf. also 1 Kings 8:10–11; 2 Chron. 5:13–14). The holiness and justice of God are featured, for no one can enter God's presence until the seven plagues are completed. We have a hint that these bowls represent the final judgment, for they are called the "last plagues" (Rev. 15:1), and with them God's judgments are completed (15:1, 8). Furthermore, after these bowls are poured out, people can enter God's presence again, for his justice is satisfied with these plagues.

Response

How easy it is to forget about God, especially his holiness and glory. We naturally think about ourselves, our concerns, our needs. We are prone to lose sight of the awesome holiness of God, failing to see his power and glory. When God judges sin, though, we are reminded of his sovereign power and blazing holiness. He saves out of mercy and for his glory, just as he did at the exodus. There is a new exodus, a greater liberation, for those who belong to Jesus Christ, so that we sing the song of the Lamb. But there is also a greater judgment for those who turn away from the Lord. They experience not the plagues of Egypt but the final judgment of God. So, in both salvation and judgment, the glory, the power, and the greatness of God are revealed.

REVELATION 16:1–21

16 Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.”

²So the first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth, and harmful and painful sores came upon the people who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image.

³The second angel poured out his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing died that was in the sea.

⁴The third angel poured out his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵And I heard the angel in charge of the waters¹ say,

“Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was,
for you brought these judgments.

⁶ For they have shed the blood of saints and prophets,
and you have given them blood to drink.
It is what they deserve!”

⁷And I heard the altar saying,

“Yes, Lord God the Almighty,
true and just are your judgments!”

⁸The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire. ⁹They were scorched by the fierce heat, and they cursed² the name of God who had power over these plagues. They did not repent and give him glory.

¹⁰The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish ¹¹and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.

¹²The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up, to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³And I saw, coming out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs. ¹⁴For they are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵(“Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked and be seen exposed!”) ¹⁶And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

¹⁷The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, “It is done!” ¹⁸And there were flashes of lightning, rumblings,³ peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as there had never been since man was on the earth, so great was that earthquake. ¹⁹The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered Babylon the great, to make her drain the cup of the wine of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found. ²¹And great hailstones, about one hundred pounds⁴ each, fell from heaven on people; and they cursed God for the plague of the hail, because the plague was so severe.

¹Greek *angel of the waters* ²Greek *blasphemed*; also verses 11, 21 ³Or *voices, or sounds* ⁴Greek *a talent in weight*

Section Overview

The judgments prepared for and threatened in chapter 15 become a reality in chapter 16. The chapter is structured by the seven bowl judgments. The angel is instructed to pour out the bowl judgments of God’s wrath (v. 1). Table 9.9 best represents the judgments in chapter 16.

TABLE 9.9: The Judgments in Revelation 16

Bowl	Realm	Verses	Judgment
Bowl 1	Earth	2	Sores on those who worship the beast
Bowl 2	Sea	3	Seas turn to blood and death in the sea
Bowl 3	Rivers/springs	4–7	Rivers and springs turn to blood
Bowl 4	Sun	8–9	People scorched
Bowl 5	Throne of beast	10–11	Plunged into darkness
Bowl 6	River Euphrates	12–16	Battle of Armageddon
Bowl 7	Air	17–21	Kingdom come

The first four bowls strike the natural world, while the last three strike the kingdom of the beast. The bowl judgments differ from the seals and trumpets in that their destruction is universal, suggesting that the bowls are poured out at the end of history. Other interpreters, given the symbolic and apocalyptic character of the judgments, argue that the bowl judgments characterize the entire period from Christ’s resurrection to the end of history. Such an interpretation is certainly

possible, but the radical and comprehensive nature of the language suggests instead that John describes judgments that take place as history draws to a close.

It is instructive to notice the comments and exhortations inserted in the bowl judgments. For instance, John inserts in the third bowl judgment the note that those judged deserve to be punished (vv. 5–7). In the fourth and fifth judgment, he remarks that people did not repent even though they saw God’s judgments (vv. 9, 11). In the sixth bowl is a parenthetical exhortation for believers to stay alert and be clothed with righteousness, since Jesus is coming (v. 15).

Section Outline

VII. The Seven Bowls from the Sanctuary (15:1–16:21) . . .

B. The Seven Bowls (16:1–21)

Comment

16:1–2 A voice from the temple instructs the seven angels to pour the seven bowls containing God’s judgment on the earth to complete his wrath (cf. Rev. 15:1; cf. also Jer. 10:25; Ezek. 14:19; Zeph. 3:8). In Isaiah, the Lord likewise punishes his enemies from the temple: “The sound of an uproar from the city! A sound from the temple! The sound of the LORD, rendering recompense to his enemies!” (Isa. 66:6). The first angel pours his bowl on the land, inflicting its inhabitants—i.e., those who accepted the mark of the beast and worshiped its image—with painful sores (Rev. 13:15, 16). We are reminded of the sixth plague on Egypt, in which boils broke out on the Egyptians while the Israelites were spared (Ex. 9:8–12; cf. Deut. 28:27, 35). Given the apocalyptic character of Revelation, it is unlikely John is depicting a literal outbreak of boils. Nevertheless, those who turn away from the true and living God will experience agony because they have refused the one who offers life.

16:3 The second bowl, like the second trumpet, afflicts the sea. In the second trumpet judgment, one-third of the sea became blood and one-third of its creatures died (Rev. 8:8–9). But in the second bowl judgment, the entirety of the sea becomes like the blood of a corpse, and every single creature in the sea dies. The severity and intensity of the judgment suggest this event comes near the final judgment, when the entire world is collapsing. Everything sustaining the world begins to fall apart.

16:4 The third bowl affects the same realm as the third trumpet. In the third trumpet, a third of the rivers and springs were embittered, leading to the death of many (8:10–11). In the third bowl judgment, all rivers and springs become blood, echoing the first plague on Egypt (Ex. 7:17–20). Once again, the severity and intensification of the judgment points to the time of the end. Water is the source of life, and thus God is eradicating in judgment what is vital for life.

16:5 The next three verses interrupt the sequence of the bowl judgments and comment on the suitability of the judgments. The angel superintending the waters

(showing the close connection between angels and the world of nature; cf. Heb. 1:7) declares God is righteous and holy in judging the wicked. John's audience might question the severity of the judgments, but the angel assures us the recompense is fitting and right. The Lord is identified here as the one "who is and who was," paralleling 11:17, another final judgment text. In other similar texts, God is designated as the one who is, who was, and who is to come (Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8). The omission of "who is to come" suggests the bowl judgments are part of a complex of events culminating in the final judgment. In other words, God is coming and bringing his kingdom in these very judgments.

16:6 The rightness of God's judgments is now explained. God has turned the rivers and springs to blood because the wicked have spilled the blood of the saints and prophets (cf. 2:13; 6:9; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4). The punishment fits and accords with the crime (cf. Isa. 49:26; Rev. 11:18), and thus this is an expression, not a miscarriage, of justice. Those who have inflicted suffering on believers will themselves suffer.

16:7 The altar now speaks (cf. 9:13), perhaps representing the voice of an angel. The altar speaks to add its witness on behalf of the saints slain under the altar (6:9), affirming that the judgments of the Lord God Almighty are true and righteous (cf. 15:3; 19:2). John is sensitive to those questioning the judgments and emphasizes that they verify God's justice. The Holy One of Israel always does what is right. Even though life often seems futile and meaningless and irrational, in the end God will make everything right.

16:8–9 A third of the sun, moon, and stars were stricken in the fourth trumpet (8:12), but here the judgment of the fourth bowl appears to make the sun more intense, for by it people are scorched, experiencing something like a very painful sunburn. This punishment is not literal but reflects the intense punishment experienced by those who reject the Lord. Those affected are certainly unbelievers, responding with fury to the God who exercises his sovereign authority to bring these plagues upon them. They are convinced they do not deserve these punishments and thus blaspheme and revile God for punishing them, complaining the judgments are unfair and calling into question his character. John has just emphasized the justice of the punishments, and thus their response is irrational and false. God's judgments and plagues should have provoked them to repent and give glory to him, acknowledging their guilt for what they have done. Instead, they are angry at what God is doing, ironically confirming the justice of their judgment.

16:10–11 The fifth bowl is poured on the beast's throne, his realm (cf. 13:2). His kingdom is darkened, echoing the ninth plague to strike Egypt (Ex. 10:21). The symbolic and apocalyptic language makes the exact nature of this judgment difficult to determine. We would not expect, for instance, people plunged into darkness to "[gnaw] their tongues in anguish." Whether physical, psychological, or both, this judgment clearly brings torment and anguish. It is fascinating to compare the fifth bowl and fifth trumpet, as we have done with the first four. The fifth trumpet

unleashed darkness on the earth (Rev. 9:2) and a demonic presence bringing agony to men (9:1–12). It seems the fifth bowl further intensifies the pain, suggesting John is describing events near the end of history, near the time when God will wrap everything up. The judgments of God, as both the fourth and fifth bowls reveal, are meant to be a precursor and anticipation of what is to come. They are intended to snap people out of their spiritual lethargy and turn them to God in repentance (2:21). Instead, those suffering from their pains and sores (cf. 16:2) are enraged at God, thinking that what has happened to them is completely unwarranted. As the proverb says, “When a man’s folly brings his way to ruin, his heart rages against the LORD” (Prov. 19:3). Hence, they curse and blaspheme God instead of blessing him, and they do not repent of their evil deeds. The irrational response of human beings underscores the rightness of God’s actions.

16:12 The sixth bowl is poured out on the Euphrates River, drying up its waters so that kings can come from the east. Once again, an illuminating comparison can be made with the sixth trumpet (9:13–19), in which four angels bound at the Euphrates were released and an army of 200 million came forth to kill a third of mankind. In the sixth bowl’s drying up (cf. Jer. 50:38; 51:36) the Euphrates to open a pathway for eastern kings (cf. Isa. 41:2, 25; 46:11), we see a kind of unholy exodus (cf. Ps. 106:9) in which evil kings are enabled to cross the river. Perhaps John was thinking of the Parthians, inveterate enemies of Rome, but the fulfillment is not limited to a specific historical moment, particularly since the Parthians did not succeed in bringing Rome down. Instead this bowl presages, in symbolic terms, the impending judgment on the wicked.

16:13 John then sees the unholy trinity: the dragon (12:3, 9), the beast (13:1), and the second beast, who for the first time is also called the false prophet (19:20; 20:10). Something horrific and repulsive is spewed from their mouths. John repeats the word “mouth” three times, calling attention to the words of these unholy sources. Such a reading fits with the second beast’s being called the false prophet, for he speaks words not from God. What comes from their mouths is as unclean and disgusting as “frogs,” showing that their words defile and destroy (cf. Ex. 8:1–13). The word “unclean” also shows the demonic character of what issues from their mouths, as “unclean” spirits are demonic (Mark 1:23; 3:11; Luke 4:33; Acts 5:16).

16:14 Now we are told explicitly that the unclean spirits are demonic, with the ability to perform signs to deceive the kings of the world (2 Thess. 2:9; 1 Tim. 4:1). We saw earlier the role of the false prophet in doing signs to deceive people (Rev. 13:13–14). Now we see a scene similar to 1 Kings 22, in which Ahab was enticed by a lying spirit to go to battle, where he met his death (1 Kings 22:20–23, 34–35). Here the rulers of the entire world gather for war on the great day of God Almighty (Rev. 17:14; 19:19), but they are deceived into assembling together for a war (*polemos*) that will bring their own demise. The last battle is the “day of the LORD”

that the prophets spoke of so often (e.g., Isa. 13:6, 9; Jer. 46:10; Ezek. 30:3; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 11, 31; Amos 5:18, 20; Obad. 15; Zeph. 1:7, 14; Mal. 4:5). What we read here matches what John says later, that the Devil “[deceives] the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle (*polemos*); their number is like the sand of the sea” (Rev. 20:8), although it is debated whether the battle of 16:14 is the same as that of 20:8. Clearly, those going to war are deceived, for they are about to enter into a battle with Almighty God (cf. Zech. 14:2)! It is a bit like a tiny impoverished nation going to war with the United States. Demons must be behind a battle that is fundamentally futile and ultimately insane.

16:15 The narrative is interrupted by an exhortation from Jesus. He announces he is coming like a thief, a phrase echoing the rest of the NT (Matt. 24:42–43; cf. 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Pet. 3:10). Just as thieves do not announce when they will strike, so the time of Jesus’ return will be a surprise. Jesus then announces one of the seven blessings in the book (cf. Rev. 1:3), declaring a blessing for those who stay awake and keep their garments on. The blessing is reserved for those who stay morally alert and live righteously. These words are rooted in the Gospel tradition (cf. Matt. 24:43; Luke 12:37) and are a staple of NT exhortation (cf. 1 Thess. 5:1–11). Those who are naked (cf. Rev. 3:18; Ezek. 16:37, 39) and give themselves over to evil and idolatry will experience eschatological shame, being destined for judgment rather than salvation. Promise of coming judgment is not merely a word for unbelievers; it is an urgent reminder to the church of Jesus that they must not join forces with the wicked. If they do so, they will face the same fate.

16:16 John resumes the thought of verse 14 after the exhortation of verse 15. The nations deceived by the dragon, beast, and false prophet assemble for a final war against the Lord’s Christ. It seems this is the same battle as that of 19:11–21 (cf. esp. 19:19), where the beast, kings, and their armies gather to make war against the Lamb. From an amillennial perspective, the battle in 20:7–9 is another description of the same incident. The reference to Armageddon, meaning Mount Megiddo in Hebrew, is quite curious, for it is obvious that Megiddo is not a mountain but a plain (2 Chron. 35:22; Zech. 12:11). Anyone familiar with the land of Israel would know this, and thus John must be making a symbolic point. John provides a clue that he writes symbolically by calling a well-known plain a mountain! Many important battles took place in Megiddo in which Israel was attacked by its foes (Judg. 5:19; 2 Kings 23:29), and here we have a scene of the last battle presented in figurative terms.

16:17 The seventh bowl, like the sixth seal (6:12–17) and seventh trumpet (11:15–19), signifies the end of history. When the seventh angel pours his bowl into the air, a voice from the temple (cf. Isa. 66:6), God’s throne, declares that everything is accomplished (cf. Rev. 21:6). The end has arrived.

16:18 As we hear that the end has come, a massive thunderstorm breaks out (cf. Ex. 9:24). At the same time, an earthquake unparalleled in its magnitude takes place (cf. Dan. 12:1; Joel 2:2; Matt. 24:21). We have seen in Revelation that thunder,

lightning, and earthquake symbolize the arrival of the end (6:12; 8:5; 11:13, 19; 19:6). They also symbolize God's awesome holiness and the terror of entering his presence, especially for those not forgiven of their sins (cf. the thunderstorm in God's throne room; 4:5 and comment).

16:19 The “great city” stands for the “city of man,” symbolically identified as Babylon—the great enemy of the people of God (cf. Isa. 13:1–14:23; 21:9; 47:1–15; 48:20; Jer. 50:1–51:64; Dan. 4:30). The city's split into three signifies its disintegration and fragmentation; it has lost its supremacy, and the end is at hand. The plural “cities” should not be distinguished from the singular “city.” John's point is that the cities of man are all Babylon; they have strayed from the ways of God. God has now remembered his promises, for the judgment of Babylon is about to commence (Rev. 14:8)—a theme to be elaborated in 17:1–19:5. God exhibits his justice by making Babylon drink the cup of his wrath (cf. 14:10; 18:6; cf. also Jer. 25:15–17), and at the same time he saves his people from the city of man that is oppressing them.

16:20 The world as we know it vanishes, for the islands are gone and the mountains disappear. John regularly signals that the end has come by portraying displacement in the natural order. We see this clearly in a number of key texts in Revelation. For instance, in 6:14 (the sixth seal judgment), “Every mountain and island was removed from its place.” When God judges on the “great white throne,” “from his presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them” (Rev. 20:11). When the new creation dawns, “the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more” (21:1). The disintegration of the natural world means the end is at hand.

16:21 The final judgment has already been described in terms of a thunderstorm and an earthquake, and now John adds the trope of a hailstorm, one of the plagues that devastated Egypt (Ex. 9:13–26). As usual, the language is apocalyptic; the world is imploding as hailstones of about a hundred pounds each are wreaking havoc on humanity. As strange as it might seem, even in judgment there is one more chance for mercy. But instead of repenting and turning to God, people curse and revile him in their great suffering, continuing to be convinced they do not deserve the suffering they face. Instead of acknowledging their sin, they continue to be infuriated with God, verifying again the rightness of the punishment they receive.

Response

This chapter features terrible judgments of God unleashing his wrath on the world. Contemporary readers may question if such judgments are warranted, concluding that the punishments exceed the crime and thus rejecting the God of the Bible. But John was sensitive to this objection, emphasizing the righteousness of the judgments. People are judged according to what they deserve. Indeed, when they see the judgments of God, they should be reminded of their sin and repent. Instead, the

punished are enraged at God and curse him. Experiencing the judgments of God should soften hearts, but many become stubborn and, instead of indicting themselves, they indict God, demonstrating even more that the judgments are warranted.

REVELATION 17:1–18

17 Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters, ²with whom the kings of the earth have committed sexual immorality, and with the wine of whose sexual immorality the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” ³And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her sexual immorality. ⁵And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” ⁶And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.¹

When I saw her, I marveled greatly. ⁷But the angel said to me, “Why do you marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit² and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come. ⁹This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; ¹⁰they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he does come he must remain only a little while. ¹¹As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. ¹²And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received royal power, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³These are of one mind, and they hand over their power and authority to the beast. ¹⁴They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

¹⁵And the angel³ said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the prostitute is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. ¹⁶And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, ¹⁷for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled. ¹⁸And the woman that you saw is the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth.”

¹Greek *the witnesses to Jesus* ²Greek *the abyss* ³Greek *he*

Section Overview

History has ended with the seventh bowl, but John circles back and looks at history from another angle, a device that by this point is quite familiar to us as readers. In 17:1–19:10 two women are considered: the harlot Babylon and the bride of the Lamb. The former is judged and the latter blessed; the former is faithless and the latter faithful; the former is a prostitute worshiping false gods, the latter a chaste bride devoted to the Lord. John concentrates here on Babylon and the judgment coming upon that city. Chapter 17 can be divided into three subsections. First, an angel invites John to see the judgment of Babylon (vv. 1–6a). She is seated on many waters, and the kings and people of earth have come to bed with her and worshiped false gods (vv. 1–2). John is transported to the wilderness and sees a woman seated on a scarlet beast; the woman is rich and arrayed like royalty, but her riches are defiled by her abominable sins (vv. 3–4). A mystery is disclosed about the woman: she is Babylon, the mother of harlots (v. 5), and John sees her drunk with the blood of the saints (v. 6a).

This leads to the second section of the chapter (vv. 6b–14). John is astonished at the woman, but the angel asks why he is astonished and promises to disclose the mystery of the woman and the beast carrying her (vv. 6b–7). The beast is remarkable because of his sort of resurrection, dazzling unbelievers (v. 8). John gives a hint of the location of the woman (v. 9) and provides tantalizing clues about eight kings (vv. 10–11). He also elaborates on an intriguing feature of the beast—it seems to be defunct and yet keeps returning. Ten kings unite together with the beast and yield their authority to him (vv. 12–13). They are infused with hatred for the Lamb and go to war with him, but he will conquer as the Lord of lords and King of kings (v. 14).

In the third section the destiny of the woman is unfolded (vv. 15–18). The waters she sits on are identified as the peoples and nations and tongues of the world (v. 15). The beast and the kings allied with him will turn against the woman and consume her with fire (v. 16). In doing so, however, they are fulfilling God's will and purposes, as his words are realized as evil implodes upon itself (v. 17). Finally, John identifies Babylon as a great city, and his audience would almost certainly think of Rome (v. 18).

Section Outline

- VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride (17:1–19:10)
 - A. The Harlot Babylon Destroyed (17:1–18)

Comment

17:1 History has ended with the seventh bowl, but John, as he does so often in Revelation, shakes the kaleidoscope again. Now he looks at the end of history by considering the fate of Babylon, the great harlot. One of the seven angels with the seven bowls summons John to come, and he will be shown the judgment of the great harlot sitting on many waters. Later, one of the same angels invites John to come and see “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (21:9). The contrast between two

women dominates the next few chapters, but the focus is on the harlot in chapters 17–18. She is called a prostitute because of her spiritual adultery and worship of false gods (cf. 19:2; cf. also Jer. 2:20; Nah. 3:4), not because of her sexual deviance, although the former clearly leads to the latter (cf. Rom. 1:18–27). The waters are identified in Revelation 17:15 as “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.” Babylon’s sitting on the waters signifies her sovereignty and rule over them (cf. 18:7).

17:2 The kings of the earth have committed sexual sin with Babylon (cf. 17:18; 18:3, 9; cf. also Isa. 23:17). Again, the language symbolically denotes spiritual adultery and unfaithfulness. And it is not as if the citizens are free of guilt (cf. Rev. 18:3; cf. also Nah. 3:4). The “dwellers on earth,” a technical term in Revelation for unbelievers (cf. comment on Rev. 3:10), have happily joined the orgy. They too have loved the delicious wine of the harlot’s sexual deviance (14:8)—her rejection of the one true God—and have become drunk (cf. Jer. 51:7). Hosea indicts Israel for similar sins (Hos. 4:11–12), for “whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding. My people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore.” The language of sexual immorality, as we see also in Hosea, is not literal; John means that the city of man has loved and served other gods. In particular, they have participated in idolatry because of its economic benefits, just as Tyre profited by playing the harlot—Tyre “will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth” (Isa. 23:17).

17:3 John is carried away in the Spirit to the wilderness. The reference to the Spirit means that the spirit of prophecy was upon him and he was inspired to speak the word of the Lord (cf. comment on 1:10). The parallel with 21:10 is especially significant, for there John is carried by the Spirit to see the descent of the new Jerusalem, where the new Jerusalem and the bride, the wife of the Lamb, stand in vivid contrast to the harlot Babylon. The wilderness can be a place of salvation (cf. 12:6, 14) or of judgment (1 Sam. 4:8; Isa. 21:1; Jer. 50:12; Lam. 4:19; 5:9); here it is clearly a place of judgment for Babylon. John sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast, the beast described in chapter 13. The woman, which is clearly Rome (cf. comments on 17:5; 17:9–11; 17:18), is supported by the empire and its armies. The beast has seven heads and ten horns, demonstrating its authority and strength (cf. comment on 13:1). The beast should use its strength for humane and righteous purposes, but it resists truth and goodness, using its strength to revile and blaspheme the one true God.

17:4 At first glance, the woman is beautiful; her clothes and jewelry are stunning (cf. 18:16; cf. also Ezek. 28:13): her clothing is purple and scarlet, and she is decked out with gold, jewels, and pearls. She holds a golden cup in her hand, but something is horribly wrong, for the cup is full of what is abominable and unclean. Her beauty has been defaced because she has given herself to evil and to false gods. She

has enriched herself by giving her allegiance to others and has devoted herself to material wealth instead of the one true God. We think of what Daniel says about Antiochus IV Epiphanes: “He shall honor the god of fortresses instead of these. A god whom his fathers did not know he shall honor with gold and silver, with precious stones and costly gifts” (Dan. 11:38).

17:5 The woman has something inscribed on her forehead, and what is written is a mystery. Typically in Scripture, a mystery is something previously hidden that is now revealed. Here the true nature and character of Rome is unveiled so that believers will not give their affection to the city of man. The woman, the city of Rome, is identified as Babylon the great (cf. Dan. 4:30), the mother of harlots and the abominations polluting the earth. John likely uses the word “mystery” because the historical Babylon that played such a central role in OT history—the head of gold in Nebuchadnezzar’s vision (Dan. 2:37–38) and the lion among the kingdoms in Daniel’s vision (Dan. 7:4)—pointed beyond itself to the city of man in general, to human culture and society insofar as it is opposed to and hates the living God. Historical Babylon no longer existed when John wrote, but the manifestation of evil in the city of man emerged in John’s day in the city of Rome. Hence, those with eyes to see would realize that Babylon was revived in the city of Rome. And, throughout history, “Babylon” has arisen again and again. What Augustine called the “city of man” has given birth to ideologies and regimes that repudiate God.

17:6a The evil of the woman becomes plain, for now John sees that she is actually drunk. Here we see a beautiful woman tarnished by sin and drunkenness, but she is drunk not with wine (the language is apocalyptic) but with the blood of the saints and those who witnessed to Jesus by their words and actions. The ESV uses the word “martyrs” here, which they were (cf. 2:13; 6:9–11; 16:6; 18:24; 19:2, 20:4), but the term (Gk. *martyrōn*, “witnesses”; cf. Matt. 18:16) was not yet a technical one. The saints witnessed to Jesus by their lives and paid for it with their deaths. The woman cannot tolerate anyone devoted to the Christ, and thus she drinks their blood by taking the lives of those who belong to Jesus.

17:6b–7 The mystery of Babylon leads to the second section of the chapter (17:6b–12), in which mysteries are disclosed to John. John is shocked and probably fearful upon seeing the woman drunk with the saints’ blood, and the angel asks John why he is so astonished. Clearly this is a literary device to underscore how startling and shocking it was for John to see a scheming witch instead of a beautiful woman. Furthermore, John may be full of astonishment, for so far the vision has disclosed not the judgment of the woman but her triumph. The angel informs John that there is a mystery concerning the woman, and we have already seen one facet of the mystery in verse 5. But here the mystery relates not only to the woman but also to the beast with seven heads and ten horns who carries her.

17:8 The mystery in this case is quite puzzling and tantalizing, and interpreters continue to be vexed by what John writes. Here we come face to face with one of

the most difficult texts in the entire book. John says the beast *was, is not now*, but *will be* raised from the abyss. It is quite puzzling how John says the beast “is not” twice in this verse, for if the beast refers to the Roman Empire—active while John wrote—how can he say it “is not”? Perhaps John thinks of a particular emperor, such as Nero, whose rule has ended, which could possibly explain what he means by saying there is no ruler presently. Some have speculated that John wrote these words in the interval between Nero (54–68 AD) and Vespasian (69–79 AD), in which Galba, Otho, and Vitellius all took power for a short time. One could say Rome lacked a ruler in this unstable period, which ended when Vitellius was defeated by Vespasian’s forces and the latter began his reign (see the list of “Roman Emperors,” which italicizes the three short reigns following Nero):

Roman Emperors

Augustus 27 BC–14 AD

Tiberius 14–37 AD

Caligula 37–41

Claudius 41–54

Nero 54–68

Galba 68–69

Otho 69

Vitellius 69

Vespasian 69–79

Titus 79–81

Domitian 81–96

No solution is completely satisfactory, but I will suggest another option shortly, for it seems unlikely that we can restrict what John writes here to the one-year interval between Nero and Vespasian. It is more satisfying to say that John reflects on the empire as a whole. In other words, it will go through periods of flourishing followed by periods of decline. What John says about Rome is true also of human history generally. There are periods of history when totalitarian rule seems a thing of the past, but history keeps rolling along, and totalitarian power returns with all its ferocity and cruelty. Believers must not think that evil has been defeated permanently in the periods of relative peace.

Those who dwell on earth (again, a technical reference to unbelievers; cf. comment on 3:10) are amazed at the beast, for it will seem as if the beast’s power has ended, only for the beast to rise again, parodying Christ’s resurrection. The inhabitants of the earth will give their allegiance to the beast, since it appears that he has conquered death. The inhabitants of the earth are morally responsible for their allegiance to the beast, and yet at the same time their unbelief was destined from the beginning of history. Before the world was created, their names were not inscribed in the book of life. Such a statement does not mean people are either justified or condemned before they are born, nor does it indicate our choices do not matter. It signifies, rather, that God is sovereign over all of history. He knows

and ordains whose names will be in the book of life. Nothing takes him by surprise or deters him from accomplishing his purpose. The book of life (cf. comment on 3:5) is often mentioned in Revelation, referring to the book containing the names of those who will enter the new Jerusalem and will escape the second death and the lake of fire. Those who give themselves to the beast will most certainly be excluded from the book of life.

17:9–11 These three verses are among the most difficult to interpret in the book, as the mystery of the woman and the beast continues to be disclosed to John. Hence, any interpretation must be adopted only tentatively. We are reminded of 13:18, where John also employs numbers and calls the readers to exercise wisdom. The seven heads of the beast are identified with the seven mountains on which the woman is seated. The seven mountains are almost certainly those on which the city of Rome was founded.

John goes on to say that the seven heads of the beast also stand for seven kings. We are then given a chronology: five of the kings have fallen and are no more. One king is now, and hence his rule continues to be exercised. Still, the rule of the present king is not the end, for another king will succeed the sixth one, though his reign will be limited. He will rule only a short time. I suggest that the short period of time designates the entire period between Jesus' first and second coming. The same term was used to designate the Devil's time on earth after being expelled from heaven by virtue of the cross of Christ (12:12). The apostle Peter also remarks that the trials and sufferings afflicting believers occur for only a short time (1 Pet. 1:6; 5:10), meaning they last until Jesus returns.

Interpreting what John says here is quite complex, for the beast that "was" and now "is not" represents an eighth ruler. But, at the same time, he belongs to the seventh. It is puzzling for John to say the beast "is not" when the Roman Empire continued to exert its persecuting influence over believers while John was writing. And to make matters more confusing, in verse 10 he speaks of the sixth king as the one who "is." There is a sense in which the beast "is not" and a sense in which it "is." Whatever we make of the details, the end of the story is relayed to us: the beast will go to destruction and ultimately will be destroyed.

Still, we are curious: what should we make of the chronology here? Many scholars have seen Nero as the eighth, who comes from the first seven (so that John forecasts the return of Nero), and thus the reference is to Roman emperors. If we begin with Julius Caesar, the lineup would be: Julius Caesar (44 BC); Augustus (27 BC to AD 14); Tiberius (AD 14–37); Caligula (AD 37–41); Claudius (AD 41–54); and Nero (AD 54–68). The three emperors who reigned from AD 68–69 could be skipped (Galba, Otho, and Vitellius), and then the seventh would be Vespasian (AD 69–79). Against this interpretation, it is not obvious that we should skip three emperors, and Vespasian's reign does not seem to fit, for it was not short, even though John says that the reign of the seventh would be short. On the other hand, the reign of the three emperors was brief, and perhaps they could be counted as one (though

counting three emperors as one is not obvious). Others start with Augustus, but we still have the problem of how the three emperors who reigned in AD 68–69 fit into the scheme. It seems this line of interpretation explains the verses inadequately.

Perhaps it is better to think here of empires that afflicted the people of God. One possibility is that the empires are Assyria, Media, Babylon, Persia, Greece, the old Roman Empire, the new Roman Empire under Constantine, and then the rule of the Antichrist. One wonders if this scheme really works. Why is Egypt left out, and how do we choose which empires to include, for the time of their rule is not always neatly discerned? Furthermore, distinguishing between the old and new Roman Empire is artificial. On what grounds is the Roman Empire split in two? Another scheme posits Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, and Greece. Then Rome is the sixth in John's reckoning. But on this scheme, it is unclear how Rome "belongs to the seven" (Rev. 17:11), and thus the solution seems artificial. It is also difficult to grasp what John means when he says the beast (presumably Rome) was and is not, for Rome still exercised its power when John wrote, and it is unconvincing to posit (as some do) that John wrote in the interval when Galba, Otho, and Vitellius were vying for power, for we are again faced with the problem of counting the three as if they were one.

Perhaps the best solution is to interpret what John says symbolically and generally. John reflects on the empires that have afflicted Israel throughout its history, and his point in referring to the sixth is that the end is near. This is comparable to Daniel's sketch of human history in Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the statue (Daniel 2) and Daniel's vision of the four beasts and the Son of Man (Daniel 7). Throughout history, totalitarian regimes have tilted against the people of God. And there are periods where it looks as if the power of these empires will not return, as if the beast "is not." But the beast, which refers to totalitarian power, always rises again. It may seem dead, yet the beast rises from the ashes and inflicts misery upon the saints again. This will be the pattern throughout history until the end arrives.

17:12 The ten horns on the beast (cf. 17:3, 7) are now identified as ten kings, and these kings are probably kingly powers outside Rome's borders. But they also represent all earthly powers and governing authorities opposed to God. Such an identification fits with Daniel's vision, where the fourth beast has ten horns, representing ten kings (Dan. 7:7, 20, 24), and the fourth beast combines together the hideous and beastly character of all four beasts in Daniel 7. Horns designate strength and rule, and here they stand for political force and strength to subjugate other nations (cf. Zech. 1:18–21). These kings have not yet received their authority, but they will rule with the beast for a limited time before the end of history. The number ten should not be taken literally. It seems that John envisions a period before the end when the beast and the rulers of the world attain power before their judgment.

17:13 The rulers of the world, predisposed to exercise their own power and infamous for their stubbornness and pride, find themselves coming together. They are harmonious in giving their power and authority to the beast. The church should

not fear when nation-states conspire together against the people of God, for this is exactly what has been forecasted. Totalitarian rule is frightening and horrendous because of the toll it exacts on those under its rule, but such rule should not surprise the people of God.

17:14 The fearsomeness of the opposition could feel overwhelming. John reminds his readers that the beast and the ten kings are implacably opposed to the Lamb. It is his authority they despise and long to remove from their lives. The rulers make war with the Lamb, manifested in the killing of the saints, for they are identified with and belong to the Lamb. Still, the final victory is sure, for the Lamb will triumph over the rulers opposing him (cf. 19:11–21). The Lamb's triumph is certain, for he is the Lord of lords and the King of kings (cf. 19:16). No power or sovereignty or majesty can compare with his. The descriptions of the Lamb here suggest his deity, for elsewhere God is identified as the Lord of lords (Deut. 10:17; Ps. 136:3; 1 Tim. 6:15) and King of kings (1 Tim. 6:15; cf. also Dan. 2:47; 3 *Macc.* 5:35; 1 *En.* 9:4). Here these titles are given to the Lamb. The saints must persevere, for then they will certainly triumph and conquer with the Lamb.

John pauses to describe those who belong to the Lamb. They are those who are called, elect, and faithful. The first two descriptions emphasize the sovereign grace of God. The saints cannot take credit for belonging to the Lamb, for they have been called by God's grace. The calling here is effectual: it is a calling that inducts them into the kingdom. In the same way, the saints are elected and chosen by God, and thus are the recipients of his marvelous mercy and grace. The saints do not belong to God ultimately because of their own decision and choice but because of God's electing grace. Yet such gracious benefits do not preclude the need for a human response. Indeed, they are the basis for such a response, and hence the saints must be faithful. They are to persevere faithfully until the end to obtain the final reward.

17:15 The third section of the chapter now commences (vv. 15–18). We were told in verse 1 that the prostitute sits on many waters (cf. Jer. 47:2), and now the angel reveals to John the meaning and significance of these waters. The waters stand for many people groups and languages. The first three terms roughly overlap, calling attention to the breadth of the harlot's rule. Her influence is massive and deleterious.

17:16 The ten horns, which are the ten kings (v. 12) ruling alongside the beast, are filled with hatred and animus against the harlot. It seems the rulers of the empire will turn against the economic and religious center of their society. Babylon is a harlot because of her idolatrous devotion to false gods and her rapacious economic system that abuses others. The kings are animated by hatred, and thus they destroy the prostitute, who ends up desolate (cf. Ezek. 26:19) and naked (cf. Ezek. 16:39; 23:29), destroyed by fire (Rev. 18:8; cf. Lev. 21:9; Jer. 34:22). Hatred is irrational and demonic. Evil ultimately implodes upon itself; it is inherently self-destructive. The city of man will collapse under the weight of its own evil and hate.

17:17 John provides a remarkable commentary on God's designs and purposes in the attack on, and destruction of, the great harlot, carried out by the ten kings. The desire of the ten kings and the beast to destroy the harlot is ultimately from God, and thus they are carrying out his purpose and will (cf. 10:7). The purposes of God in such events do not cancel out the authenticity of human choices and decisions, for the hatred of the ten kings and the beast for the harlot is no charade (17:16). The kings and the beasts are not puppets and marionettes whose strings God pulls. We see the same phenomenon in Isaiah, where Assyria fulfills God's will while clearly doing what it desires to do (Isa. 10:5–34). So, too, God rules over what the beast and the kings do to the harlot, yet he is not morally blameworthy or indicted for the evil the kings and beast perform. We see elsewhere that God can predestine evil events so that his purposes are fulfilled, while remaining unstained by evil. The supreme example of this is the cross of Christ: Jesus' death was predestined by God, but those who killed him were held responsible (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28). We are reminded here that God rules over history, that evil empires and kings, though culpable for the horrific evil they carry out, are never outside the hand of God. Nor should they boast as if they accomplish anything apart from his purposes.

17:18 The identity of the woman is now disclosed, and we are told that she represents a city. The reference to the seven hills suggested Rome (v. 9), and now the reference to Rome is confirmed. Rome here represents the city of man opposed to the things of God, which John's original audience experienced firsthand. At the same time, the moniker "Babylon" suggests that what is said here transcends Rome and represents all other cultures and cities of the world opposed to the things of God.

Response

We see in this chapter a trinity of evil powers: the beast, the ten kings, and the wicked and ostentatious harlot. The evil practiced, especially by the harlot, is lurid and shocking. The blood of the saints is shed by the prostitute while she pursues a life of glamor and luxury. John reminds us, however, that evil will not triumph. Evil finally turns upon itself and implodes. The unity present at the beginning of the coalition's evil machinations dissolves at the end into mutual hatred and recrimination. The implosion of evil, however, is not merely a human reality. We live in God's world, and he steers history so that his purposes and will become a reality. Even when evil is doing its worst, God is directing the outcome without being besmirched himself by evil. Believers must never become defeatist when they see a culture descending into evil, although this does not mean we shut our eyes to the evil reigning around us. Still, we are always full of confidence and hope, for we know the end of the story. We know the final score: we win.

REVELATION 18:1–8

18 After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth was made bright with his glory. ² And he called out with a mighty voice,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!
 She has become a dwelling place for demons,
 a haunt for every unclean spirit,
 a haunt for every unclean bird,
 a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast.

³ For all nations have drunk¹
 the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality,
 and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her,
 and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power
 of her luxurious living.”

⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,

“Come out of her, my people,
 lest you take part in her sins,
 lest you share in her plagues;
⁵ for her sins are heaped high as heaven,
 and God has remembered her iniquities.
⁶ Pay her back as she herself has paid back others,
 and repay her double for her deeds;
 mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed.
⁷ As she glorified herself and lived in luxury,
 so give her a like measure of torment and mourning,
 since in her heart she says,
 ‘I sit as a queen,
 I am no widow,
 and mourning I shall never see.’
⁸ For this reason her plagues will come in a single day,
 death and mourning and famine,
 and she will be burned up with fire;
 for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her.”

¹ Some manuscripts *fallen by*

Section Overview

Chapter 17 introduced the theme of the fall of the great city, the city of man. As is typical in Revelation, John revisits, expands, and fills in the fall of the city, under the moniker “Babylon,” in 18:1–19:5. Babylon refers to Rome but also stands for

the city of man in general. John picks up OT texts about Babylon and applies them to human cities in opposition to God. Indeed, the remainder of the book of Revelation could be characterized as a contrast between the city of man (Babylon) and the city of God (the new Jerusalem), a contrast between two women: the harlot Babylon and the bride of the Lamb (the church). This segment (18:1–8) consists of two voices, which are probably both angelic, declaring the judgment of Babylon. The first angel, shimmering with glory, declares the fall of Babylon (18:1–3) into desolation and demonic activity (v. 2). Babylon is judged because it has corrupted nations, kings, and merchants with its idolatry (v. 3). Another voice brings a message in verses 4–8: God’s people are exhorted to leave Babylon (v. 4) since her sins are great and God is about to punish her (v. 5). Babylon will be repaid for the evil she has done (v. 6), and the glory she enjoyed will now be a cause for mourning (v. 7). Babylon will be destroyed in a day with the mighty and fearsome judgment of God (v. 8).

Section Outline

VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride
(17:1–19:10) . . .

B. The Declarations of Two Angels (18:1–8)

Comment

18:1 Angels play a prominent role in Revelation, and the destruction of Babylon in chapter 17 is now replayed and revisited from another angle. We again see John coming to the end of history only to backtrack and fill in what has happened in more depth. It was insufficient to announce the judgment of the city in chapter 17, for John wants to explain in more detail the reasons for the judgment and the horror it engenders among unbelievers. The angel descends from heaven, showing its transcendent authority, and illumines the earth with its glory and splendor (cf. Ezek. 43:2). The beauty and power of the angel indicate it is about to introduce a matter of weighty importance.

18:2 The angel announces with authority and majesty (cf. 7:2; 10:3; 14:7, 9, 15; 19:17) that Babylon the great has fallen. The impending fall of Babylon has been declared previously in Revelation (14:8; 16:19; 17:5), and now it is further expounded. The pronouncement of Babylon’s fall echoes the words of Isaiah: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon; and all the carved images of her gods he has shattered to the ground” (Isa. 21:9). Babylon in the OT was the great enemy of the people of God. It was Babylon that sent Judah into exile in 586 BC, and Babylon is the head of gold in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan. 2:32, 37–38) and the lion in Daniel’s vision (Dan. 7:4, 17). The OT prophets announced God’s judgment on Babylon for its evil and idolatry (e.g., Isa. 13:1–14:23; 47:1–15; Jer. 50:1–51:64). Babylon was destroyed and judged in 539 BC, but its fall became a type and pattern for kingdoms and cities opposed to God.

Here in Revelation, Rome, as the city of man, is described as Babylon. Any city that sets itself up in opposition to God becomes Babylon, as Rome did in the ancient world. Just as ancient Babylon was judged, so too will Rome be judged. Again, John reuses the language of Scripture (cf. Isa. 13:21–22; 14:23; 34:11, 14; Jer. 50:39; 51:37). The city of man, the Babylon of the world, will become the home of demons and unclean spirits. Foul and unclean birds and animals will dwell there. Babylon was once a thriving and exciting city, but it never recovered from its destruction in 539 BC. This forecasts the final judgment, when the city of man will be desolated and destroyed forever. Rome will ultimately and finally face the same fate as Babylon.

18:3 The fundamental reason for Babylon's judgment, and Rome's, is now relayed to John's audience. The nations of the world have drunk the wine of her immorality (cf. Jer. 25:15; 51:7). John is not talking primarily about sexual sin here, even though he uses language of sexual unfaithfulness. In the OT, Israel's defection from the Lord is described as whoredom and harlotry (cf. Jer. 3:8–9; Ezekiel 16; 23; Hos. 1:1–3:5; cf. also Isa. 23:17). So, too, the root sin of the city of man is abandoning God, pursuing other gods instead of him (cf. Rom. 1:21). The great city has influenced the nations of the world so that they have turned away from the one true God. The kings of the earth have followed the same path, and their sin is also described in terms of sexual deviance. Once again, the metaphor communicates spiritual adultery—rejection of God's lordship. The merchants of the earth are indicted for growing rich from the luxuries afforded by their alliance with Babylon. John is not saying that riches per se bring judgment, but those gained by participation in the same idolatry and evil as Babylon do indeed (cf. Ezek. 27:12, 18, 33).

18:4 Now another voice rings out, presumably that of another angel. This voice also comes from heaven, signaling a transcendent authority. But here the message is for the people of God, those who have remained faithful to Jesus Christ. They are exhorted to come out of Babylon, to avoid participating in her sins, for those who sin like Babylon in forsaking the Lord will face the coming final judgment. In commanding God's people to flee Babylon, the angel echoes the OT: "Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, 'The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!'" (Isa. 48:20; cf. Jer. 50:8; 51:6, 9, 45). Israel was commanded literally to leave Babylon, to return to Judah and Jerusalem. John's readers are not commanded to leave Rome literally (cf. 2 Cor. 6:17). John means they must not participate in the idolatry of Rome; they must not give their allegiance to the emperor and forsake Jesus Christ. They must be willing to renounce the wealth and reputation of the world to follow Jesus Christ. The sins pursued by Babylon should be forsaken, for those who participate in such sins will also receive the plagues coming upon Babylon. "Plagues" refers to both the trumpet (Rev. 9:18, 20) and the bowl judgments (15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21), and here it designates final judgment.

18:5 The judgments inflicted on Babylon are warranted, for her sins have reached heaven, meaning they are remarkable for their depth and breadth (cf. Gen. 18:20; Ezra 9:6; Jonah 1:2). Jeremiah said about historical Babylon, “Her judgment has reached up to heaven and has been lifted up even to the skies” (Jer. 51:9). The long stretch of no punishment made it seem as if there would be no judgment, but God never forgets iniquities, putting all things right in the end.

18:6 God remembers Babylon’s sin because he is just, and his justice is manifested in the maxim, “The punishment fits the crime.” The Babylons of the world will not remain unscathed, for the evil they do will turn back on them. Often in the OT, Babylon is threatened with punishment for her misdeeds (cf. Ps. 137:8; Jer. 16:18; 50:15, 29; 51:24, 49). It is somewhat surprising, then, that the punishment is said to be double for her works—her cup of wrath is mixed to a double portion. How should we understand this? It is quite unlikely that John teaches that Babylon is punished more than she deserves. Perhaps the language is hyperbolic, expressing the thought that Babylon receives the full measure of her punishment. Or, conversely, the double punishment motif could indicate that the gravity of her sin—her sins reached up to heaven (Rev. 18:5)—warrant a greater punishment (cf. Ps. 79:12).

18:7 The interpretation proposed for the previous verse is confirmed here, for once again John emphasizes that the punishment fits the crime. The fundamental sin of the city of man is her glorifying herself instead of giving glory to the one true God. She refuses to give thanks and praise to God and worships the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:21, 25). Inasmuch as Rome has pursued luxury, to that extent will she experience torment and sorrow. Remarkably enough, the Babylons of this world are convinced they will not face punishment. Picking up the words of Isaiah 47:7–8, the harlot exalts herself as queen instead of seeing herself as a wicked and scheming prostitute (cf. Ezek. 28:2–8). She is also deluded, convinced she will never know widowhood or mourning. She thinks she has a godlike status, immune to the vicissitudes of life and the judgment of God.

18:8 The sin pursued by the harlot will come cascading suddenly upon her, just as Isaiah predicted: “These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day; the loss of children and widowhood” (Isa. 47:9; cf. Jer. 50:31). Again, the judgment upon the historical Babylon is appropriated typologically and applied to Rome. In a single day her confidence will vanish as plagues descend upon her. The plagues are identified as death, mourning, and famine. The prostitute, in a punishment reminiscent of the penalty for a priest’s daughter who turns to prostitution (“The daughter of any priest, if she profanes herself by whoring, profanes her father; she shall be burned with fire”—Lev. 21:9), will be burned with fire (cf. Rev. 17:16). The judgment is not impersonal or simply cause and effect. God personally judges her, showing his lordship and mighty power (cf. Jer. 50:34), for no one can triumph over him. Nor can anyone give himself over to evil without facing God’s wrath.

Response

The judgment of the great harlot functions as an exhortation to the church of Jesus Christ, as seen in verse 4. We are to come out from the city of man and forsake its sins. John does not mean we are to establish a segregated society in which we have no contact with unbelievers. The point is that believers are not to throw in their lot with those who have forsaken the true and living God. Believers are to separate from the world, not by withdrawing from it but by living pure and holy lives in God's sight. We are to be in the world, as Jesus taught us, but not of it (John 17:15–16). If we belong to the Babylons of the world, we will not escape the just judgment of God.

REVELATION 18:9–19

⁹And the kings of the earth, who committed sexual immorality and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning. ¹⁰They will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say,

“Alas! Alas! You great city,
you mighty city, Babylon!
For in a single hour your judgment has come.”

¹¹And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, ¹²cargo of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, fine linen, purple cloth, silk, scarlet cloth, all kinds of scented wood, all kinds of articles of ivory, all kinds of articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, ¹³cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour, wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls.¹

¹⁴ “The fruit for which your soul longed
has gone from you,
and all your delicacies and your splendors
are lost to you,
never to be found again!”

¹⁵The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

¹⁶ “Alas, alas, for the great city
that was clothed in fine linen,
in purple and scarlet,
adorned with gold,
with jewels, and with pearls!

¹⁷ For in a single hour all this wealth has been laid waste.”

And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off ¹⁸ and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning,

“What city was like the great city?”

¹⁹ And they threw dust on their heads as they wept and mourned, crying out,

“Alas, alas, for the great city
 where all who had ships at sea
 grew rich by her wealth!
 For in a single hour she has been laid waste.”

¹Or *and slaves, and human lives*

Section Overview

The judgment of the great harlot has been announced, and now the response to her judgment is seen in a lamentation over her fall. The lamentation is neatly split into three sections: that of kings (Rev. 18:9–10), merchants (18:11–17a), and those who work on the sea (vv. 17b–19). The kings who participated with Babylon in harlotry and enjoyed its luxury wail over its destruction and judgment (vv. 9–10). The merchants lament because “no one buys their cargo anymore” (v. 11), cargo itemized in verses 12–13. The list concludes with a shocking indictment of the merchants’ evil, for they sold human beings as slaves. The delicacies and luxuries the merchants enjoyed are gone forever (v. 14). The judgment of Babylon fills the merchants with fear and grief (v. 15). Their exploitative version of the good life with its wealth and luxury has vanished in a moment (vv. 16–17a). In the same way, all those who work the sea are struck with sadness (v. 17b). The source of their wealth for so many years is gone, up in smoke (vv. 18–19). Here is further evidence that the judgment is not restricted to Rome, for just as John picks up the judgment of Babylon and applies it to Rome, so here he applies the judgment of the ancient city of Tyre to Rome. John’s use of the OT suggests that every city following the path of Babylon and Tyre, every city pursuing idolatry like Rome, is part of the great city of man. For this reason he can apply the same indictment to Jerusalem, the city where Jesus was crucified (11:8).

Section Outline

- VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride
 (17:1–19:10) . . .
 - C. Lamentation over Babylon’s Fall (18:9–19)

Comment

18:9 The kings of the earth weep and wail when they see the judgment of Babylon, for they were, so to speak, in bed with her. They committed sexual immorality with her, but as we saw in 18:3, literal sexual sin is not in view here. Sexual immorality stands for the anti-god lifestyle of Babylon and the kings. The kings

and Babylon got along swimmingly because together they tried to dethrone God; they pledged allegiance to the state and its emperor. In doing so they padded their bank accounts, got rich, and lived in luxury. But the days of luxury are over; Babylon has been thrown down. The judgment of Babylon that John describes harks back to the judgment of the great city of Tyre, which was famous for its seafaring ways, transporting wares all over the ancient world:

Then all the princes of the sea will step down from their thrones and remove their robes and strip off their embroidered garments. They will clothe themselves with trembling; they will sit on the ground and tremble every moment and be appalled at you. And they will raise a lamentation over you and say to you,

“How you have perished,
you who were inhabited from the seas,
O city renowned,
who was mighty on the sea;
she and her inhabitants imposed their terror
on all her inhabitants!” (Ezek. 26:16–17; cf. Jer. 50:46).

The desolation of Tyre in history prefigures the upending of the city of man—the great harlot.

18:10 Seeing the rising smoke of Babylon’s judgment fills the kings with fear and foreboding. Upon seeing her torment, they do not want to get too near, sensing that the same fate awaits them. They rue and regret what has happened and cry out, “Alas,” for the mighty and great city of man has been destroyed so quickly. The judgment was executed in an hour; what seemed to be invincible vanished before their very eyes.

18:11 The merchants of the earth (cf. Ezek. 27:36) are also plunged into sorrow over the harlot’s demise. Their grief, however, is self-referential, for they do not truly care about Babylon. What troubles the merchants is the loss of buyers for their wares and goods. The wicked grieve only over themselves.

18:12–13 John specifies the goods marketed by the merchants, including gold, silver, and precious jewels and pearls. The finest and most expensive clothing was also for sale, including purple, silk, and scarlet. Various products of ivory, expensive and attractive woods, bronze, marble, and iron were also sold, as well as other delightful products such as cinnamon, spices, incense, frankincense, wine, wheat, cattle, sheep, and horses. There is nothing wrong with trade, and such products make human life more enjoyable and tolerable. John is not condemning trade and production per se. But there was something radically wrong with the trade that was practiced, for they also marketed human beings. Human beings were sold as slaves, demonstrating that profit had become a god, displacing any moral considerations.

18:14 The pleasures the merchants delighted in, the *raison d'être* of their existence, were no longer to be had. They enjoyed the exquisite beauty, fine craftsmanship, and artistry of the beautiful things they bought and sold. But this is all now a thing of the past. The day of the harlot's judgment has come, and now they can only think nostalgically about a past that will never come again.

18:15 Like the kings (vv. 9–10), the merchants wail and weep over Babylon's downfall. They do not want to get too close, being anxious lest the judgment on Babylon come to their door as well. And yet they know Babylon's fate is inextricably tied to their own, for their wealth came from the harlot. Without her it will not be renewed.

18:16–17a The merchants cry out in anguish as they see the judgment meted out on the city formerly decked with beauty. It was a seductive harlot, wearing stunning clothing and beautiful gold, jewels, and pearls. Yet now it has been unmasked by the judgment of God as a wicked witch, a notorious prostitute, a woman without honor. Her reign of beauty and glory has collapsed in a moment, and the true nature of the harlot has been revealed.

18:17b–19 The lament is now voiced by sea captains, sailors, and all those who work in and profit from the maritime industry. They too rue what has happened to Babylon, and yet they stand far away so as to avoid the same fate. John again picks up the judgment of Tyre and the lament of sailors over the destruction of the city that enriched so many. A longer citation from Ezekiel's lamentation over Tyre seems fitting. Here Ezekiel records the response of those who worked the sea, upon hearing of Tyre's downfall:

They cast dust on their heads
and wallow in ashes;
they make themselves bald for you
and put sackcloth on their waist,
and they weep over you in bitterness of soul,
with bitter mourning.
In their wailing they raise a lamentation for you
and lament over you:
“Who is like Tyre,
like one destroyed in the midst of the sea?
When your wares came from the seas,
you satisfied many peoples;
with your abundant wealth and merchandise
you enriched the kings of the earth.
Now you are wrecked by the seas,
in the depths of the waters;
your merchandise and all your crew in your midst
have sunk with you.” (Ezek. 27:30b–34)

John combines in his vision the judgments of Babylon and Tyre, both of which forecast the eschatological judgment of the city of man. In seeing the destruction of the harlot, the uniqueness of the city pierces the hearts of seafarers, who exclaim that no other city is comparable to the city being destroyed. Actually, there is a greater city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven, but those who love Babylon fail to see that more excellent city. Those who work the sea have fallen in love with the harlot, and their lives are entwined with hers. Hence the judgment of the harlot spells the doom of their own economic enterprises, and the desolation of the harlot means their livelihood has come to an end (cf. Isa. 34:10; Ezek. 26:19).

Response

God does not oppose prosperity and riches per se, but in a world where the rich often act unjustly and oppress and enslave others to advance themselves, many wonder if there is any justice. John proclaims there is a day coming when the glittering beauty of those who have unjustly enriched themselves will be defaced. The dazzling woman with expensive jewels and stunning clothing will be unmasked as a prostitute. Those who crawled into bed with her will face the same judgment. We will see, then, the upside-down kingdom: those who belong to the Lord will be exalted, while those who rejected him will be humiliated. The reversal will happen quickly and will shock and astonish those who have given their allegiance to the city of man. They will be filled with grief as they see everything they have given their lives to slipping away. John's message for his churches and for us is not to be lured and enticed by the harlot. Her charms and beauty and riches beckon us, but her joys are short-lived, and her time of judgment is coming.

REVELATION 18:20–19:5

²⁰ “Rejoice over her, O heaven,
and you saints and apostles and prophets,
for God has given judgment for you against her!”

²¹ Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying,

“So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence,
and will be found no more;
²² and the sound of harpists and musicians, of flute players and
trumpeters,
will be heard in you no more,
and a craftsman of any craft
will be found in you no more,

- and the sound of the mill
will be heard in you no more,
²³ and the light of a lamp
will shine in you no more,
and the voice of bridegroom and bride
will be heard in you no more,
for your merchants were the great ones of the earth,
and all nations were deceived by your sorcery.
²⁴ And in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints,
and of all who have been slain on earth.”

19 After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying out,

- “Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God,
² for his judgments are true and just;
for he has judged the great prostitute
who corrupted the earth with her immorality,
and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

³ Once more they cried out,

- “Hallelujah!
The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.”

⁴ And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah!”

⁵ And from the throne came a voice saying,

- “Praise our God,
all you his servants,
you who fear him,
small and great.”

Section Overview

The world laments and grieves over Babylon’s demise, but heaven, saints, and apostles rejoice. Words of joy and praise help us structure and delimit the text. First, heaven, saints, apostles, and prophets rejoice over Babylon’s judgment (Rev. 18:20). The world will not go on as it has for centuries: no more concerts, no more craftsmen, no more production of food, no more weddings, no more selling (18:21–23). The judgment descends on account of the merchants’ sorcery and the harlot’s shedding of the blood of God’s people (18:23–24). Second, a loud “Hallelujah” resounds, for God’s salvation and power have appeared, and he has judged the one who has corrupted the earth and killed the saints (19:1–2). Third, two more “Hallelujahs” are uttered and God is worshiped when saints and angels see the smoke of Babylon rising forever (19:3–4). Fourth, a voice from God’s throne summons God’s servants to praise him (19:5).

Section Outline

VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride

(17:1–19:10) . . .

D. Rejoicing over Babylon's Fall (18:20–19:5)

Comment

18:20 The contrast between people of the world and saints could not be more dramatic. The former wail and weep and grieve over the desolation of Babylon, but the latter rejoice. The call to rejoice begins in heaven, and the saints, apostles, and (presumably OT) prophets are summoned to rejoice as well, for God has judged Babylon. John picks up and applies the words of Jeremiah: “The heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon, for the destroyers shall come against them out of the north, declares the LORD” (Jer. 51:48; cf. Deut. 32:43). Believers are to pray and long for the salvation of all people as long as life lasts, but they also pray for God’s kingdom to come and his will to be done (Matt. 6:10). When God judges the wicked, believers rejoice because they see God’s justice vindicated.

18:21 The judgment of Babylon is now depicted in apocalyptic terms, as if a mighty angel threw a millstone into the sea. Again the words of Jeremiah about Babylon are applied in John’s account of his vision: “When you finish reading this book, tie a stone to it and cast it into the midst of the Euphrates, and say, ‘Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disaster that I am bringing upon her, and they shall become exhausted’” (Jer. 51:63–64). Rome, likewise, will be drowned in the sea, so to speak, never to resurface (cf. Ezek. 26:12).

18:22–23 The ordinary actions of human society have come to an end (cf. Jer. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11). In a bustling city, music is played in all kinds of venues, but now the harp, flute, and trumpet have grown quiet (cf. Isa. 24:8; Ezek. 26:13). Craftsmen improve the quality of life with their inventiveness, creativity, and skill, but when disaster strikes their work comes to an end. So too, the mill ceases production. The lights that kept the city stirring and bustling at night have been extinguished. Indeed, all joy has vanished, for the pristine joy of bride and bridegroom is no more. The day of judgment has come, for although the merchants of Rome were renowned, they deluded the nations with their sorcery. At its heart the city was anti-god, having rejected his authority to turn instead to false gods (cf. Isa. 47:9; Nah. 3:4).

18:24 The judgment of murderous Babylon is warranted, for she put to death both saints and prophets (6:10; 16:6; 17:6; 19:2; cf. Jer. 51:49). Her opposition to the people of God reflects her rejection of God’s rule, manifested in putting to death those opposing the great harlot. The rest of the slain in this verse may refer to the death of other people, even unbelievers. Babylon could abide no one, believer or unbeliever, who stood in her path or resisted her ways. She insisted on totalitarian devotion and worship and was enraged to the point of shedding the blood of those refusing to participate in her idolatries.

19:1 The judgment of the great Babylon, the mother of harlots, is done. John hears the voice of a great multitude in heaven crying out “Hallelujah!” and ascribing salvation, glory, and power to God. Why does John refer to salvation, when the judgment of the harlot is the theme? Probably because the people of God have been saved from the evil witch, the monster who tormented them relentlessly. God has shown himself glorious and powerful by delivering his people and judging their great enemy.

19:2 Is the “Hallelujah!” of verse 1 warranted? Should God be praised for judging Babylon? Is such praise actually a distorted and twisted response to God’s judgments? Verse 2 answers this question by giving us a reason “for” (*hoti*) the harlot’s condemnation. John informs us that God’s judgments are “true and just.” The judgment is not arbitrary or unfair (cf. 15:3; 16:7). Quite the contrary: God’s judgment of Babylon accords with justice and is the right thing to do. In other words, God’s justice would be called into question if he did *not* judge Babylon. The saints rejoice because they see that God has put everything right. The regime of the great harlot has been destroyed forever, and the world can enjoy the peace and harmony God intended for it from the outset. The judgment of the harlot is fitting because of her harmful impact on the earth. She corrupted it with her immorality. Again, the focus is not on sexual sin, though it is likely included. Sexual immorality here, as we have seen so often in Revelation, signifies the idolatry of Babylon and her refusal to worship the one true God. Babylon’s passion is to see all people everywhere worship the beast. The judgment is warranted also because of the martyrdom of God’s servants. God has “avenged” their blood (cf. Deut. 32:43; 2 Kings 9:7). “Avenged” does not signify a crazed and unrestrained vengeance. Instead it signifies the just punishment deserved by those who have murdered the people of God.

19:3 The contrast between the response of the world and the saints continues, for again believers voice a loud “Hallelujah.” Their praise comes as they see the smoke of Babylon rising forever. They are full of praise when they see the justice and rightness of God’s judgment of their great enemy. The judgment is permanent and irreversible, for the smoke of Babylon ascends forever (cf. Isa. 34:10; Rev. 14:11; 18:9, 18). Babylon will never rise again; her reign is over!

19:4 The worship is not limited to human beings. The angelic beings, both the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures that have played such a prominent role in Revelation, reprise their role described in chapters 4–5. They bow in worship to the God seated on the throne, to the sovereign God who exercises his rule and justice in condemning and judging the harlot for her evil. They do not shrink back from God for his judgment but give him praise. They affirm what he has done by exclaiming “Amen” and delight in it by crying, “Hallelujah.”

19:5 A voice comes from the throne, a phenomenon we see on two other occasions in Revelation (16:17; 21:3). Once again there is a call to praise God, presumably again for his saving intervention. In judging Babylon, God also saves his people and delivers them from his enemies. Such a motif is regularly present in the OT. When God routs

his enemies, be they Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon, he also saves his people. Thus all of God's servants, those who fear and honor him, whether insignificant or influential in the world's eyes, are summoned to praise God (cf. Pss. 22:23; 113:1; 134:1; 135:1).

Response

The loud hallelujahs and praise from the people of God when Babylon is judged may seem strange and even anti-Christian. How should we apply this as Christians today? First, the praise comes after the judgment, not before. Why does this matter? Because as long as unbelievers are alive, we are to long and pray for their salvation. But on the last day, after history has concluded, we will see that the judgment of God is right and true and just. None of us will question whether those who are in hell should be there, for then we will see the perfect rightness and goodness of God's judgment. Second, we should underscore that God's judgment is just and righteous. The punishment of Babylon is akin to the destruction of the Nazis under Hitler. When an evil empire that has spread terror and torment is destroyed, people rejoice. Third, the judgment of the wicked means the deliverance of the righteous. Saints praise God at the destruction of Babylon because her demise means relief and freedom for the saints.

REVELATION 19:6–10

⁶Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,

“Hallelujah!

For the Lord our God
the Almighty reigns.

⁷ Let us rejoice and exult
and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;

⁸ it was granted her to clothe herself
with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

⁹And the angel said¹ to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.” ¹⁰Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.” For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

¹Greek *he said*

Section Overview

This passage presents a contrast of two women and two cities: the harlot—Babylon—and the bride of the Lamb—the new Jerusalem. The saints are full of praise for the judgment of the harlot, and in these verses they praise God’s reign and the marriage of the Lamb. In verse 6 the multitude with a mighty roar cries out, “Hallelujah,” because God has begun to reign. In verse 7 the commencement of God’s rule is seen from another perspective. There is a call to rejoice and glorify God because the marriage of the Lamb is at hand and the bride is ready for the wedding. The bride’s readiness means she wears proper clothing: beautiful linen that is pure, representing the righteous deeds of the saints (v. 8). Then John steps back to pronounce a blessing on those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb (v. 9). The wonder and glory of the marriage and feast propel John to worship at the feet of the angel who disclosed such things to him (v. 10). But John is forbidden to worship the angel and must worship only God, for the angel is not a divine being but a fellow servant. The text ends with a puzzling and provocative saying about the testimony of Jesus being the spirit of prophecy. Perhaps John means that the essence of prophecy centers on the testimony about and given by Jesus Christ.

Section Outline

VIII. The Judgment of Babylon and the Wedding of the Bride

(17:1–19:10) . . .

E. Rejoicing over the Marriage of the Lamb (19:6–10)

Comment

19:6 On the one hand there is a call to joy and praise because of the judgment of Babylon. But there is also thunderous praise because the kingdom has come—God has begun to reign (cf. 1 Chron. 16:31; Pss. 93:1; 97:1; 99:1; 118:24; Zech. 14:9; Rev. 11:15, 17). The reign of God cannot, of course, be separated from the judgment of Babylon. The sound—like a multitude, the roar of a waterfall, and peals of thunder—demonstrates we have arrived at the climax of history (cf. Dan. 10:6; Rev. 1:15; 14:2). The awesome joy is comparable to the roar of the crowd in a stadium today.

19:7 Believers are told to rejoice and exult and glorify God because the wedding of the Lamb is at hand (cf. Isa. 61:10). One of the remarkable features of this section is the irrepressible gladness bursting through the text. It is hard to imagine anything more joyful than a wedding, and this is the wedding of all weddings. Indeed, all other marriages are modeled after Christ’s relationship with the church (Eph. 5:22–33, esp. v. 32). We have been prepared for this, for Yahweh’s relationship to Israel is also explained in terms of bride and groom (e.g., Isa. 49:18; 50:1; 54:5; 62:4–5; Jer. 2:2, 32; 3:20; Ezekiel 16; Hos. 1:1–3:5). The wedding of the Lamb represents the consummation of God’s purpose in history, signifying his desire to be in relationship with human beings. The bride must be ready to marry the Lamb, as is further explained in the next verse.

19:8 The bride is prepared for her wedding to the Lamb, wearing the proper clothing (cf. Isa. 61:10). Her adornment consists of “fine linen, bright and pure.” In Ezekiel we read of the Lord caring for Jerusalem and adorning her with linen and silk (Ezek. 16:10, 13), but the context there demonstrates that she was an unworthy wife. Another anticipation of the wedding scene in Revelation is the marriage of the Davidic king to a foreign bride in Psalm 45, in which the bride approaches the king in beautiful robes (Ps. 45:13–14). Two things are said about the bride’s adornment here in Revelation 19. First, the fine linen is given to her by God. The goodness of the bride is a gift of God, not a result of the inherent virtue or wealth of the bride. Second, the adornment of the bride stands for the goodness actualized in her life. The fine linen of the bride in Revelation, John explains, represents the “righteous deeds of the saints.” Here the bride’s apparel stands in contrast to the fine linen of Babylon (18:16), which signified Babylon’s luxury and debauchery. The bride is ready because she has lived a holy life, has done what is pleasing to God, has not followed the pathway carved out by Babylon. Still, the righteous deeds of the bride are the result of God’s work in her life.

19:9 One of the seven blessings is now written down for posterity (cf. comment on 1:3) so that it will not be forgotten. Those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb are blessed by God (cf. Luke 14:15). No feast compares to this feast, and the joy at this supper is incomparable to any joy on earth. We see anticipation of this feast in the messianic feast promised in Isaiah, which also includes the hope of the resurrection:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces. (Isa. 25:6–8; cf. also
Matt. 8:11–12; Mark 14:25; Luke 13:28–29)

The angel also affirms that his words are the true words of God (cf. Rev. 21:5; 22:6). The promises are so great and stunning and so different from life on earth, with its sorrows and sufferings, that we need to be assured they are true; they will become a reality.

19:10 The words and appearance of the “angel” (cf. v. 9) are striking, and John responds by falling on his face in worship before the angel (cf. 22:8). But the angel rebuffs John, saying that he is merely a fellow servant of John and of those who subscribe to the testimony of Jesus. The angel commands John to worship God alone. The starkness and brevity of the command to “Worship God” reminds us of the God-centered vision of the book of Revelation. God is the center and cir-

cumference of John's visions, but the next words demonstrate that the centrality of God also includes the preeminence of Jesus. The command to worship God does not exclude the worship of Jesus, as the entire book teaches repeatedly. Hence, we have the fascinating words that follow, stating that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." The saying is tantalizingly ambiguous and has provoked a number of different interpretations. John probably means that Spirit-inspired prophecy focuses on the testimony given by and about Jesus Christ. Christians are to worship God and be God-centered, but prophecy also points us to the centrality of Jesus and his majesty and greatness.

Response

The coming joy, promised in both the Lamb's marriage to the bride and his marriage supper, is more than we can digest. Our passions and desires for God are weak, and John wants us to imagine the future when our delight in God is maximized. Every joy on this earth, every wedding and every feast, points us to the most sublime wedding, the most exquisite feast. We are to prepare ourselves by following Jesus so we can enjoy this coming wedding feast. Then our hearts will sing as they never have before, and we will laugh and rejoice as never before. It will be a laughter and joy unstained by any sin or sorrow or worry. Death will be a distant memory, and we will rejoice forever.

REVELATION 19:11–21

¹¹ Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in¹ blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule² them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

¹⁷ Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly directly overhead, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, ¹⁸ to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of mighty men, the flesh of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all men, both free and slave,³ both small and great." ¹⁹ And I saw the beast and the kings of the earth with their armies gathered to make war against him who was sitting on the horse and against his army. ²⁰ And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence⁴ had done

the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.²¹ And the rest were slain by the sword that came from the mouth of him who was sitting on the horse, and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

¹Some manuscripts *sprinkled with* ²Greek *shepherd* ³For the contextual rendering of the Greek word *doulos*, see ESV Preface ⁴Or *on its behalf*

Section Overview

The judgment of Babylon and the marriage supper of the Lamb are the end of history. John cycles back, shakes the kaleidoscope, and gives us another picture of the end. Postmillennialists see the spread of the gospel throughout history in this text, but the imagery used here and the parallels with other texts referring to the end (Rev. 16:14, 16; 17:14) indicate this is a dramatic picture of the second coming of Jesus Christ. Heaven opens, and Jesus is seated on a white horse—the one who is faithful and true is coming to wage the final battle (19:11). His eyes see all, nothing is hidden from him, and the diadems on his head signify his sovereign rule (v. 12). No one knows his name, meaning no one rules or controls him. His robe is dipped in blood, signifying he is coming for judgment, and he is called the Word of God, for he is God’s message to humanity (v. 13). As Jesus comes, the armies of heaven follow him, clothed in white garments and riding on white horses (v. 14). Jesus is coming in judgment, for he has a sword to pierce his adversaries and will rule them with an iron rod and tread them in the winepress of God’s wrath (v. 15). On his robe and thigh are inscribed “King of kings and Lord of lords” (v. 16). No opponent can conquer him.

An angel appears and invites birds to a great sacrifice of human flesh (vv. 17–18). The kings of the earth and the beast array themselves against Jesus, seated on the white horse, and his army (v. 19). The battle, however, is anticlimactic: Jesus seizes the beast and false prophet and throws them into the lake of fire (v. 20)! The remainder of their army is killed with the sword of his mouth, and the birds gorge themselves on their flesh (v. 21).

Section Outline

- IX. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15)
 - A. Defeat of the Beast, the False Prophet, and Their Adherents (19:11–21)

Comment

19:11 The end has arrived with the judgment of Babylon and the marriage of the Lamb, but John recapitulates and gives us another picture of the final judgment. Heaven opens to signal a revelation from God (cf. Ezek. 1:1; Acts 10:11; Rev. 4:1). John sees a white horse (cf. Rev. 6:2), and the one sitting upon it, Jesus Christ, is identified as the one who is faithful and true (cf. 1:5; 3:7). The white horse points

to Jesus' rule and majesty as a great warrior. He is faithful to God and his promises, and believers can count on him to vindicate them and vindicate the truth. Jesus is coming on his horse for war. Many wars are unjust: a ruler rampages and ravages for selfish gain. But Jesus judges and makes war righteously (cf. Pss. 9:8; 96:13; 98:9), fulfilling the vision of the Messiah in Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11 (Ps. 72:2; Isa. 11:4). Righteous judgment includes both punishment and salvation; Jesus judges and wages war for righteous and good purposes, so that evil is removed from the earth and the shalom promised for creation is established.

19:12 How do we know Jesus judges and wages war righteously? Because his eyes are like a flame of fire (cf. 1:14; 2:18)—he sees beneath the surface, and hence his judgment is not superficial or mistaken. As Isaiah 11:3 says about the branch from David, “He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear.” His judgment accords with the truth, with the way things really are. He is also able to judge and triumph because of his kingly rule and strength; the “many diadems” on his head signify sovereign rule and authority. He not only sees what is right; he has the strength to enforce the right as sovereign ruler. The rider on the white horse is sovereign, for the name inscribed on him is known only by himself (cf. Prov. 30:4). In the ancient world, to know another person's name was to exercise control over that person. Thus, the one who wrestled with Jacob did not disclose his name to Jacob (Gen. 32:29). Similarly, the angel of the Lord did not tell Samson's parents his name, saying only that it was wonderful (Judg. 13:18). No one is able to control or manipulate the one on the white horse. Yet it is no contradiction that Jesus is also identified as having the names “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev. 19:16) and “The Word of God” (v. 13), for there is a sense in which we know Jesus and a sense in which he is hidden from us. He is both immanent and transcendent, near to us and hidden from us. We truly know God through Jesus Christ, but we do not know him exhaustively or fully.

19:13 The robe dipped in blood might suggest to some the atoning blood of Christ, but the context here is the second coming of Christ to judge the wicked. This fits with the OT background of Yahweh's garments spattered with blood in the judgment of Edom: “Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress? ‘I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me; I trod them in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered on my garments, and stained all my apparel’” (Isa. 63:2–3). The day is characterized as the “day of vengeance” for Edom but the “year of redemption” for Israel (Isa. 63:4). Edom in the OT often stands for all the kingdoms of the world (cf. Isaiah 34), and John's appropriation of that theme is quite fitting. The judgment of the wicked, which stains Christ's garment with blood, constitutes vengeance for the wicked, but at the same time signals redemption and deliverance for the people of God. Jesus is coming as the divine warrior to destroy his enemies and deliver his people (cf. Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 33; Judges 5; Habakkuk 3).

Jesus is also called “The Word of God,” which echoes John 1:1 while adding the words “of God.” God’s word is effective and powerful, unleashing his judgment upon the world (cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 18:15–16). We read in Psalm 33:6, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made.” Isaiah says that God’s word does not “return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:11). Jesus himself is God’s word, God’s message, to the world, expressing his message of both judgment and salvation.

19:14 The rider of the white horse is not alone but is accompanied by the armies of heaven wearing beautiful linen, white and pure, signifying righteousness and holiness (cf. 3:4; 7:9; 19:8). The army could consist of believers (17:14) or angels (Ps. 68:17; Dan. 7:10; Zech. 14:5; Matt. 16:27; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26); perhaps both are included. They also ride white horses, designating goodness and purity. Although the picture of the battle here need not be literal, the point is clear: the forces of good are arrayed against the forces of evil.

19:15 The three descriptions found in this verse provide further evidence that Jesus is coming for judgment. First, from his mouth comes a sharp sword to strike the nations. The sharp sword stands for the word issuing from his mouth, showing the inherent power and effectiveness of Jesus’ words (cf. 1:16; 2:12). Isaiah 11:4 speaks similarly of the branch of David (cf. also Isa. 49:2): “He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” We read in 2 Thessalonians 2:8 that Jesus will slay the man of lawlessness “with the breath of his mouth.” Second, Jesus rules over the nations with an iron rod (cf. Rev. 2:27; 12:5). Such rule fulfills the prophecy of Psalm 2, where God promises that the anointed Son of David, installed as king, will break his opponents with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:9; cf. *Psalms of Solomon* 17:23–24). Third, Jesus treads the winepress of God’s wrath (cf. Rev. 14:20). Again, the image is rooted in the OT, where God treads out the winepress in his wrath (cf. Isa. 63:2–3; Lam. 1:15; Joel 3:13). All three images indicate the last judgment is at hand.

19:16 The one who judges has a name inscribed on his robe and thigh: “King of kings and Lord of lords” (cf. comment on 17:14). Jesus has the authority and power to judge because he is the sovereign Lord over every other king and ruler. No one can ultimately frustrate his will or purposes. Those who oppose him will experience his wrath.

19:17 John then sees an angel standing in the sun, sheathed with its glory and standing over the earth. In a loud voice the angel summons birds to gather for a great supper prepared for them by God. The vision draws on the judgment of Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38–39, in which birds are invited to gather for a sacrificial feast and eat the flesh and drink the blood of Israel’s enemies:

Speak to the birds of every sort and to all beasts of the field: “Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing

for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth—of rams, of lambs, and of he-goats, of bulls, all of them fat beasts of Bashan. And you shall eat fat till you are filled, and drink blood till you are drunk, at the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you.” (Ezek. 39:17–19; cf. also Ezek. 39:4; Isa. 34:6; Jer. 46:10)

In Ezekiel the judgment is visited upon the enemies of Israel as the last judgment in history, paralleled closely by the angel’s summons here in Revelation 19.

19:18 As we see in Ezekiel 39, the birds are invited to gorge themselves on the flesh of human beings and horses (Ezek. 39:18, 20): kings, captains, mighty men, horses and their riders, and the remainder of mankind (cf. Rev. 6:15). The picture of human flesh being consumed by birds is a grisly way of depicting the destruction of those who reject Jesus Christ. In the ancient world, to remain unburied was a great dishonor, and such is the fate of those who reject Jesus Christ.

19:19 John looks in his vision and sees the enemies of Christ gathered to wage war against him. The beast, the kings aligned with him (cf. Rev. 17:12–14), and their armies are poised to fight the one riding on the white horse and his armies. Such a battle fulfills the words of Zechariah 14:2, “I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle.” The rage against the Lord and his Christ spoken of in Psalm 2:2 comes to a climax here, and the last battle (*polemos*) noted in Revelation 16:14 is about to occur. What animates the beast and his kings is a hatred of the Christ.

19:20 The armies are facing one another and poised to fight, but the battle turns out to be ridiculously easy. Jesus seizes the beast and false prophet and casts them alive (cf. Num. 16:33) into the lake of fire and sulfur (cf. Dan. 7:11). As 2 Thessalonians 2:8 says, the Lord “will kill [the man of lawlessness] with the breath of his mouth and bring [him] to nothing by the appearance of his coming.” The power and the glory of the beast and the false prophet, though they seem remarkable, are no match for Jesus Christ.

The false prophet (cf. Rev. 16:13; 20:10) is the same figure as the second beast in 13:11–18, but the designation “false prophet” emphasizes his deluding power via signs and wonders and errant prophecies. In fact, John pauses here to note his signs and how they deceived those who received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image (cf. 13:13–15). This suggests that those led astray *desired* to be misled.

John encourages his audience to persevere to the end by portraying the final fate of the beast and the false prophet. The lake of fire is mentioned for the first time here, and it reappears several times in the concluding chapters (20:10, 14, 15) as a place of torment identified as the second death. The image of fire for final punishment is used elsewhere in the NT as well (Matt. 5:22; 13:40; 18:8–9; 25:41; Mark 9:43, 48; Heb. 10:27; Jude 7). Those who die the second death will never come

to life, and thus all those who side with the beast and false prophet will regret forever that they were co-opted by them.

19:21 If the beast and false prophet are so easily disposed of, the rest of the armies are no problem. They are killed by the sword coming out of the mouth of the majestic warrior, Jesus, who sits on his white horse. In other words, his word is powerful and effective enough to wipe out his enemies (cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:5; cf. also Isa. 11:4; 49:2). It leaves carnage on the battlefield, and birds satisfy themselves with the flesh of those who are judged (cf. comment on Rev. 19:17 and Jer. 7:33; 16:4; 19:7; 34:20). The picture of the last judgment is apocalyptic; it is not a transcript of how the final judgment will play out. Nor is it necessary to think that birds will literally feast on human flesh. The language is a vivid way of speaking of the final judgment and eternal destruction of those opposing Jesus Christ.

Response

Sometimes it seems as if evil will triumph forever, but such an impression does not accord with reality. Jesus is coming again, and the rulers and people opposed to him will be destroyed. Evil is no illusion, but goodness is always stronger and has an enduring permanence that evil cannot match. God has allowed evil to do its worst for many millennia, but he will not tolerate it forever. When Jesus returns, we will see the last battle. But the battle is remarkably easy, for Jesus simply speaks the word and his enemies are routed and thrown into the lake of fire. We all want to be on the side of the victors. If we belong to Jesus, we are assured of ultimate victory.

REVELATION 20:1–6

20 Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit¹ and a great chain.² And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years,³ and threw him into the pit, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be released for a little while.

⁴Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.⁵ The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection.

⁶Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

¹Greek *the abyss*; also verse 3

Section Overview

Here we have the famous millennial text, certainly the most debated text in the book of Revelation.²⁸ There are very good arguments for both the premillennial and the amillennial views. Both views will be explained, although a slight preference will be given to the amillennial view.

The text begins with an angel descending from heaven with a key to the abyss and a chain in his hand (Rev. 20:1). He seizes Satan and binds him in the pit for a thousand years (v. 2). The pit is closed and locked so that Satan cannot deceive the nations, but near the end of the thousand years he is released for a short time (v. 3). John then sees people seated on thrones (v. 4a). Those on the thrones have authority to judge. John tells us that those on the thrones are martyrs: all who refused to worship the beast come to life and reign with Christ for a thousand years (v. 4b) and participate in the first resurrection (v. 5b), while the rest of the dead do not come to life until the thousand years are over (v. 5a). A blessing is pronounced over those who enjoy the first resurrection, for the second death has no authority over them; they will be priests of God and Christ and will reign with Christ for one thousand years (v. 6).

This text is the most controversial in the book of Revelation, and interpreters debate the credibility of various millennial views. A brief sketch of the positions advocated should prove helpful. Postmillennialists maintain Christ will return *after* a long period of blessing on earth, hence the prefix *post*, meaning “after”: Christ will come after the millennium. After the millennial reign, the new heaven and earth will arrive. The one thousand years are not literal but signify a long period of time in which the world is transformed by the gospel. Some postmillennialists believe the thousand years begin at an undefined time in history—some point after the resurrection of Jesus. Other postmillennialists believe the thousand years began at the resurrection. The timing of the millennium is not vital for the post-millennial position.

Amillennialism literally means “no millennium,” but such a label is not the best descriptor of the position. *Realized* millennialism is better. The thousand years in this view stand for a long period of time and do not designate a literal thousand-year reign. Amillennialists argue that the millennium began with the resurrection of Jesus and will last until the second coming. During this time, deceased believers reign spiritually with Christ in heaven in the intermediate state, awaiting their physical resurrection and the renewal of all things, and Satan is bound in the sense of being bound at the cross while the gospel goes out to the nations (Matt. 12:29).

28 For texts that function as parallels in some respects, cf. Isaiah 24:21–22; 1 *Enoch* 10:4–6, 11–13.

Other amillennialists think the saints' coming to life refers to regeneration (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1) instead of reigning in heaven, and thus there is some diversity within amillennialism concerning what it means to come to life and reign with Christ.

Premillennialists say Christ will literally return to earth *before* the millennium (hence the prefix *pre*) and will reign one thousand years on earth before bringing an end to everything at the end of the millennium. Most premillennialists believe the thousand years designate a literal period of time, but such a view is not necessary for the position, for one could believe in a literal reign of Christ on earth for a long period of time other than exactly one thousand years and still be premillennial. Premillennialists are divided into historic and dispensational premillennialists. Some are called historic premillennialists because they identify themselves with premillennial church fathers, including Papias, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. Dispensational premillennialists, who first appeared in the nineteenth century, are distinguished from historic premillennialists by arguing for a secret rapture seven years before Jesus returns to inaugurate the millennium.²⁹ Dispensational premillennialists emphasize the fulfillment of promises to the Jewish people during the millennium.

I suggest here that the best options are the historic premillennial and amillennial views. The dispensational premillennial view rests on the notion of a rapture seven years before Jesus returns, which is quite unlikely, although space is lacking here to demonstrate why. Suffice it to say that 1 Thessalonians 4:16 does not describe a secret rapture. In addition, in 2 Thessalonians 1–2 the punishment of the wicked, deliverance of the righteous, and gathering of the saints occur at the same time. Furthermore, the notion of promises specially fulfilled for the Jews in the millennium is not even mentioned by John in Revelation 20, nor is this idea found in the rest of the NT. Dispensationalists read their interpretations of OT prophecies into Revelation 20, but their interpretation is flawed, for the NT maintains that Jews and Gentiles are equally members of the people of God (e.g., Eph. 2:11–3:13). The notion of Jews having a special place in the millennium contradicts the NT witness that all believers are children of Abraham (cf. Rom. 4:9–17; Gal. 3:6–9).

The postmillennial view also fails to convince for a number of reasons, although the notion of a world gradually transformed by the gospel is one all Christians wish were true. But Scripture clearly indicates that evil will intensify before the end (cf. Matt. 24:9–31; 1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:1–5). In addition, postmillennialists argue Revelation 19:11–21 refers not to the second coming but to the routing of God's enemies, leading to a long period of peace and prosperity on earth. But in the commentary above I argue that the text refers almost certainly to the second coming. Hence, below, I will focus on the historic premillennial and amillennial readings of the passage. I include both views equally since it is difficult to decipher which view is correct, and readers should appreciate this difficulty.

²⁹ By this view, the seven years between the rapture and the millennium would be the time of "tribulation," but cf. comment on 7:13–14.

Still, for the following reasons I tentatively opt for the amillennial view, although I have changed my mind more than once and feel uncertainty as I write. First, nowhere else in Scripture is a thousand-year millennium clearly taught, and a new doctrine should not be founded on an intensely controversial text, especially from an apocalyptic book full of symbolism. Second, we have seen that Revelation is recursive and recapitulatory, coming to the end and then telling the same story again from a fresh perspective. John might be doing the same thing in Revelation 20, telling the story of Revelation 19:11–21 from another perspective. Third, many of the texts allegedly speaking of the millennium in the OT (e.g., Isaiah 60 and Ezekiel 40–48) are not alluded to in Revelation 20. What is even more striking is that these same chapters are copiously alluded to in Revelation 21:1–22:5. In other words, the so-called millennial texts are fulfilled in the new creation! This suggests the promises of a renewed world and new temple in the OT are fulfilled in the new creation, not in a millennium. Some want to say the fulfillment is in both the millennium and the new creation, but it is hard to see how the new temple prophesied in Ezekiel 40–48 is fulfilled in any way in the millennium.

Fourth, the early church fathers were divided on the millennium. Sometimes it is claimed the earliest fathers were premillennial, but Charles Hill has demonstrated the matter was disputed, and many were amillennialists.³⁰ Hence, we cannot appeal to the early church to find a consensus on the matter. Fifth, the historic premillennial view has difficulty explaining the unglorified people in the millennium, for when Jesus returns at the end of chapter 19, he destroys all his enemies. It is straining to say that some were left on earth who survived Jesus' return. The NT clearly teaches Jesus' return is the day of reward and judgment for all (Matt. 25:31–46). Sixth, in Scripture the final resurrection, final judgment, victory over death, arrival of the new creation, and second coming of Christ are part of a total package. There is no indication in any other text that these great events are separated. Finally, we will see below that the premillennial reading of Revelation 20 has some very good arguments, but the amillennial reading has remarkable strengths too. And since the latter fits best with the rest of the scriptural witness, it should be favored. Unfortunately, clarity will be lacking on this issue until Jesus returns. Fortunately, the central truth is that Jesus is indeed returning!

Section Outline

IX. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15) . . .

B. Reigning with Jesus for a Thousand Years (20:1–6)

Comment

20:1–2 A new section begins with “Then I saw” (*kai eidon*), a very common phrase in Revelation, occurring thirty-two times. Premillennialists maintain the phrase

³⁰ Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

has chronological significance, but amillennialists say this is not necessarily the case. Given the diversity of usage of the phrase, it is difficult to argue that it clearly points to a new section chronologically. It is quite possible that 20:1–10 describes from another angle the events recorded in 19:11–21, as we have often seen Revelation recapitulate the time of the end.

One significant problem with the premillennial view is that Jesus had destroyed all unbelievers at the end of chapter 19; thus it is difficult to understand how anyone could enter the millennium with an unglorified body. Why would Satan need to be bound if the armies opposing God were destroyed at the second coming? Historic premillennialists argue the armies in chapter 19 do not represent all people—some were not destroyed at the second coming and thus enter the millennium. However, nowhere else is there any indication that some human beings are not judged at the second coming. Perhaps there is ammunition for the premillennial view in Zechariah 14; there the Lord judges and slays those opposed to him (Zech. 14:12), but some remain who refuse to worship the Lord, and because of their recalcitrance the Lord withholds rain (vv. 17–19).

Angels descending from heaven are a common feature in Revelation, and here an angel holds in his hand the key to the abyss and a great chain (cf. Rev. 9:1, 11; 11:7; 17:8; cf. also Luke 8:31; Rom. 10:7). The angel seizes the dragon, the great monster opposing the people of God, and binds him in the pit for a thousand years. We see an interesting parallel text in Isaiah 24:21–22: “On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.” The dragon is described further (cf. also Rev. 12:9) as the ancient serpent who deceived Eve (Gen. 3:1, 2, 4, 13, 14; cf. Ps. 91:13; Isa. 27:1; 2 Cor. 11:3) and as the Devil (the slanderer of God’s people) and Satan (the adversary of God’s people).

20:3 The angel throws Satan into the pit and locks him in. Thus Satan is unable to deceive the nations for one thousand years. Near the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a short time to wreak havoc. Premillennialists say the events in verses 2–3 occur when Christ returns to earth, arguing that Satan cannot be locked up before Jesus returns, for he is alive and well during the present evil age, standing behind the beast and false prophet, deceiving (13:14) and inciting the people of the world to persecute Christians (13:1–18). Satan is called the “ruler of this world” (John 12:31), and elsewhere John writes, “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). It is difficult to see how, according to premillennialists, these statements can be true if Satan is confined to the abyss. In Revelation 12 Satan is cast from heaven to earth, and the point there, though certainly symbolic, is that Satan has no ground to accuse believers before God since the death of Christ has removed their guilt. It seems here, however, that John goes a step further, the symbolism indicating Satan is absolutely restricted from acting on the earth.

Amillennialists suggest the locking away in a pit is symbolic and does not mean Satan is absent from earth. The text says he can no longer deceive the nations. Some interpret this to mean that Satan, during the present evil age, is unable to deceive the nations into gathering at Armageddon. According to this reading, the text does not say Satan does not deceive anyone; the point is that the nations are not deceived to the extent that they wage final war against God's people. Another way of interpreting this from the amillennial perspective is that the deception relates to the spread of the gospel. With the coming of Christ, the gospel now goes to the ends of the earth. In the OT salvation was confined to Israel, and the nations of the world were deceived. Now the gospel is believed in all nations, and thus Satan no longer deceives the nations as he did in the OT era. Unbelievers are still deceived by Satan, but the deception over all nations that characterized the OT period is now lifted, so that some believe from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. Satan was bound at the cross (Matt. 12:29; cf. John 12:31; Col. 2:15; Rev. 12:9), say amillennialists, prevented from gathering and uniting all nations to oppose the Christ and his people until the time of the end.

20:4 John's vision shifts to human beings. He sees thrones, and those who sit on them are given the responsibility of judging. He also sees martyrs, those beheaded because of the "testimony of Jesus" and the "word of God." The testimony of Jesus has played a significant role in the book (cf. comment on 1:2; cf. also comments on 1:9; 12:17; 19:10), as has the word of God (cf. 1:2, 9; 6:9). Rule is given to those who suffered for Jesus' sake, who gave their lives because of the word of the gospel (cf. Dan. 7:22; Matt. 19:28; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 3:21). As in 6:9, John sees their "souls," introduced with the word *kai*, which may have the sense of equivalent ("even") or of additional ("also"; ESV); in either case John likely refers to all believers. In a sense, the entire church is viewed as a martyr church, as those who have given their lives for Jesus Christ. In this particular verse, those who have been given "the authority to judge" have faithfully refused to compromise with the beast. They did not worship the beast or its image, or receive the mark on their hand or forehead. John has earlier made it very plain that those who worship the beast or its image or receive the mark will suffer torment forever (Rev. 14:9–11). On the other hand, the saints triumph over the beast and its image (15:2). Judgment and reward belong to faithful believers, to those who give their lives to Jesus and overcome until the end. In other words, eternal rewards are granted to all true believers. The reward specified here is that they "came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years."

Premillennialists understand this passage to refer to the physical resurrection. Those who were martyred are vindicated by God and come to life again. The verb *zaō* can refer to the resurrection of Christ (2:8; cf. also Ezek. 37:10; Rom. 14:9), and it is argued that the same is true here, especially when correlated with the first resurrection of Revelation 20:5. Scholars holding this view point out that this is the only verse referring to the resurrection of believers in the book, and that seeing this as a

reference to the resurrection shows the victory of the saints more fittingly than the amillennial reading, which sees the saints reigning in heaven during this present evil age. Furthermore, the notion of *souls* coming to life supports the notion that souls are raised to a life new and better than mere existence in the intermediate state.

Amillennialists find the reference to “souls” here to be signifying that the souls come to life during this present evil age (cf. Rev. 6:9–11). In other words, coming to life here refers not to physical resurrection but to life in the intermediate state. The souls of believers reign with Christ in heaven now—the word “thrones” elsewhere in Revelation refers to heaven, and thus it does not fit for it to refer here to the reign of saints on earth. We see in Revelation 14:13 that death is blessed for believers as they are given the crown of life for persevering until the end (2:11). Other amillennialists understand the coming to life here to be conversion—those who are converted are now raised with Christ (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1).

20:5 The rest of the dead do not come to life until the thousand years have ended. If only martyrs come to life in 20:4, the remainder of the dead includes all unbelievers and all other believers. If 20:4 refers to all believers, the rest of the dead refers only to unbelievers. It is much more likely, as argued above, that the latter view is correct, as the entire church is viewed as a martyr church (without requiring the idea that all are literally put to death). John pauses and remarks, “This is the first resurrection,” clearly referring to the coming to life of the martyrs and saints described in verse 4.

Premillennialists understand the first resurrection to refer to physical resurrection. Unbelievers are raised from the dead after the thousand-year reign of Christ, but this is distinguished from the first resurrection, which refers to the physical resurrection of the martyrs and believers mentioned in verse 4. One of the strongest arguments for the premillennial view appears here; the noun “resurrection” (*anastasis*) invariably refers to physical resurrection in Jewish thought. Indeed, there is no clear example of it not referring to physical resurrection. Also, the sequence here presents a good argument for premillennialism, for the rest who come to life a thousand years later do not experience a different *kind* of resurrection. Almost all agree that the rest experience a *physical* resurrection, but if that is the case, the first resurrection is likely physical as well. We have not two different *kinds* of resurrection here but *two stages* in which the dead are raised physically. One objection to the premillennial view is that John 5:28–29 presents the resurrection of those who are good and evil as occurring at the same time. Premillennialists respond that the book of Revelation clarifies that there is an interval, and it is not necessary for every statement about the resurrection to also mention an interval between the two resurrections.

Amillennialists argue, on the other hand, that the first resurrection is a spiritual resurrection. Even if the term “resurrection” (*anastasis*) refers to physical resurrection elsewhere, we should not be surprised by a symbolic meaning in apocalyptic literature; there are texts speaking of a spiritual resurrection conceptually (Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1) elsewhere as well. The first resurrection means

life in the intermediate state (or, alternatively, conversion), while the second refers to physical resurrection. Similarly, the first death is physical death, while the second death is final judgment. This is an intriguing suggestion, though it should be noted that John never specifically refers to a “first death” or a “second resurrection” (see table 9.10).

TABLE 9.10: Amillennialist View of First Resurrection and Second Death in Revelation

First resurrection: spiritual/intermediate state	<i>First death: * physical</i>
<i>Second resurrection: * physical</i>	Second death: spiritual

**Not specifically named in Revelation*

I noted above that premillennialists argue that the relationship between the two resurrections indicates they are of the same nature, i.e., they are both physical. But if the schema advanced here is correct, the two resurrections are *not* of the same nature. The premillennial reading is certainly possible, and may very well be right, but it is also possible that the first resurrection anticipates and looks forward to the second resurrection, so that the first is spiritual and the second physical. The words “first” (*prōtos*) and “new” (*kainos*) should be distinguished, according to amillennialists. “New” refers to the coming new creation. “A new heaven and a new earth” are coming (Rev. 21:1)—a “new Jerusalem” (21:2)—and God will make “all things new” (21:5). The new heaven and earth are contrasted with the “first heaven and the first earth” (21:1). “First” refers to life in this present age, for the “former [i.e., first] things” (*prōta*) have passed away (21:4). If we follow this pattern, the *first* resurrection is the pre-consummated resurrection, the spiritual resurrection occurring in this age, and the *second* resurrection is the physical resurrection—the final resurrection to be enjoyed by all believers in the age to come. Similarly, the first death is physical death, which all experience, in contrast with the “second [*deuteros*] death” that the wicked will suffer forever (2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). According to this reading, what is “first” refers to this present world, while what is “second” or “new” refers to the coming new world.

20:6 One of the seven blessings of the book (cf. comment on 1:3) is now pronounced over those who enjoy the first resurrection. The first resurrection is so wonderful because the second death has no power over those who experience it (cf. 2:11; 20:14; 21:8). In other words, those who experience the first resurrection will avoid the lake of fire. Instead, participants in the first resurrection will be priests of both God and Christ. We see here that God and Christ share the same stature, that Jesus is fully God; it is inconceivable, e.g., that the author would say they are priests of God and of angels. The picture of believers as priests mediating God’s blessing has been present since the outset of the book (cf. 1:6 and 5:10)—believers are priest-kings, like Adam in the garden, and will reign with Christ one thousand years.

Premillennialists understand this rule to refer to a thousand-year (or very long) reign on earth after Christ’s return—if the resurrection here denotes the physical resurrection promised to believers. Amillennialists take it to refer to the rule of

deceased saints in heaven between the first and second coming, if the first resurrection refers to life given in the intermediate state—a spiritual, not physical, resurrection. Other amillennialists see a reference to regeneration, the new life believers enjoy as born-again Christians.

Response

Christians have disagreed over the details of this passage for nearly two thousand years. But one thing is clear: the persecution, the execution, the death of believers is not the final reality. Those on the “wrong” side of history will live again; they will be shown to be in the right after all. They may die once, but not twice. They will reign as priest-kings; they will fulfill the original mandate given to Adam. Satan’s power is limited and circumscribed by God, while God’s plan for his own will be realized, and hence we can be full of hope for the future.

REVELATION 20:7–10

⁷And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison ⁸and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. ⁹And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven¹ and consumed them, ¹⁰and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

¹Some manuscripts *from God, out of heaven, or out of heaven from God*

Section Overview

At the end of the thousand years, Satan is released for a short time to deceive the nations of the four corners of earth. John picks up the language of “Gog and Magog” from Ezekiel 38–39. The nations of the world gather with incalculable numbers for the last battle as the anti-god forces march against the saints and surround the city of God. The battle is short-lived, for fire comes down from heaven and consumes them. The Devil is cast into the lake of fire, along with the beast and false prophet, and suffers torment there forever.

Section Outline

- IX. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15) . . .
 - C. The Last Battle (20:7–10)

Comment

20:7–8 At the end of the thousand-year period, Satan is released from his prison to deceive the nations at the four corners of the world. In Ezekiel 38–39 the nations attacking Israel are called Gog and Magog; here the terms designate all the kingdoms of the world bent on attacking the people of God. Such an attack is due to Satan's deception, for fighting against the people of God is futile. John echoes Ezekiel, who says that in the last days Gog and others will move against Israel like storm clouds, while the people of God will be secure and unconcerned (Ezek. 38:8–9, 11–12, 16; 39:2). According to John, these mysterious nations represent the anti-god forces conspiring against the people of God (cf. 1 Sam. 13:5). Satan gathers the nations, countless as the sand on the seashore, for the final battle against God's people.

Premillennialists understand these verses to refer to a final battle near the end of Christ's millennial reign on earth. The people of God have become accustomed to peace and hence are surprised by the sudden surge of force against them (Ezek. 38:8–11). Premillennialists typically argue that the evil breaking forth demonstrates the iniquity of the human heart, for even after a paradisiacal reign of nearly a thousand years, unbelievers still turn toward evil. Amillennialists maintain that this battle is another picture of the battle (*polemos*) described in 19:11–21 (cf. esp. Rev. 19:19; cf. also 16:14 and Zech. 14:2), in which the wicked turn against believers before Jesus returns. John regularly returns to the final battle and describes it from different angles. Evil will increase dramatically near the end of history before the end arrives. Amillennialists and premillennialists agree that evil will rear its ugly head at the end of history before the new creation dawns.

20:9 The plot against the saints spreads and widens (cf. Hab. 1:6) as the nations surround the camp of the saints and their beloved city to destroy the people of God. This city is not Jerusalem but the people of God as a whole (cf. Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22–23). As God's enemies are poised to attack, fire descends from heaven, from God himself, annihilating them (cf. 2 Kings 1:10, 12). John again draws on Ezekiel, where the nations conspire to attack Israel but instead provoke God's wrath and judgment (Ezek. 38:18–19) of fire and hail (Ezek. 38:22; 39:6). Once again premillennialists see this as taking place near the end of Christ's thousand-year reign on earth, and amillennialists as taking place near the end of history, shortly before the second coming.

20:10 The unholy trinity (cf. 16:13) are together forever, but not in a place they would desire. The Devil, who incited the last battle and deceived the peoples of the world to participate in the battle against God and the Lamb, is cast into the lake of fire, along with the beast and the false prophet. They will be tormented there forever (cf. 14:9–11; Matt. 25:46). Premillennialists assign the punishment of the Devil to a period one thousand years after the beast and the false prophet were thrown into the lake of fire. Amillennialists contend that John pictures the final judgment from another angle, and hence the judgment of the Devil, beast,

and false prophet took place at the same time. Part of the debate centers on the English verb “were,” which suggests the beast and false prophet were already in the lake of fire before the Devil arrived. Premillennialists thus argue that the Devil is cast into the lake of fire *after* the beast and false prophet. Amillennialists, on the other hand, point out there is no such Greek verb in the text. English translators have supplied the word “were,” but the verb “are” can just as easily be supplied; hence the verse is unclear about the timing of the Devil’s incarceration. John is not giving us a chronology but simply telling us that the Devil, beast, and false prophet are in the same place.

Response

The insanity of evil stands out here—it cannot truly triumph over good, and thus Satan’s attempts to persuade humans to rebel against God are an exercise in futility. Yes, he brings many down with him, but at the end of the day he will be routed. We are reminded that all sin is ultimately a kind of insanity; it never makes sense. It brings no satisfaction or joy and never succeeds ultimately. Those who trust in the Lord and persevere in faith will have the greatest joys.

REVELATION 20:11–15

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Section Overview

The punishment of the beast, false prophet, and Devil brings us to the last judgment, the great white throne, where God sits to assess human beings (Rev. 20:11a). The universe as we know it has come to an end, as witnessed by the earth and sky’s fleeing away (v. 11b). All the dead, all human beings, stand before God, and he opens the books, including the book of life (v. 12a). Everyone is assessed according to whether his name is inscribed in that book (v. 12b). The sea, Death,

and Hades give up their dead (v. 13). Nothing can finally stand against the Lord, so Death and Hades are also thrown into the lake of fire, identified as the second death (v. 14). Anyone whose name is not written in the book of life is also thrown into the lake of fire (v. 15).

Section Outline

IX. The Triumph of God in Christ (19:11–20:15) . . .

D. The Last Judgment (20:11–15)

Comment

20:11 God's throne, representing his authority and rule, plays a major role in Revelation—the word “throne” refers to God's rule more than thirty times in the book. In particular, in chapter 4 it signifies the sovereignty and rule of God as the creator of all. All creation bows in worship before the one exalted in his majesty. The prophecy of Daniel 2:35 is becoming a reality, for the stone representing the kingdom of God is now a great mountain filling the earth, and the anti-god kingdoms no longer reign. The great white throne signifies God's place of judgment (cf. Dan. 7:9). Heaven and earth flee from God's presence, and no place is found for them. It is evident from this expression that the end of history has arrived; their fleeing means the world as we know it is no more. We see similar expressions elsewhere in Revelation (cf. also Ps. 114:3, 7). For instance, in Revelation 6:14 the sky vanishes like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island disappears. Likewise, in 16:20 every island flees and the mountains vanish (cf. also 2 Pet. 3:7, 10). When the new heaven and earth arrive, the first earth passes away, along with the sea (Rev. 21:1). Thus John speaks here of the passing away of the old creation.

20:12 All the dead, whether powerful or poor, stand before God's throne to be assessed by him. Books are opened, including the book of life (cf. comment on Rev. 3:5; cf. also Isa. 4:3), meaning that the time of judgment is at hand (Dan. 7:10; cf. Rev. 11:18). The dead are judged by what is written in the book, i.e., according to their works. Scripture repeatedly says that judgment will be according to works (Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 14:12; Rev. 2:23; 22:12). Judgment according to works is not merely an OT theme but is also prominent in the NT. Those who are in the book of life have performed works warranting inclusion, while those who are punished are those who have pursued and practiced evil. Such works are not the basis for being found in the book of life but constitute the necessary evidence of belonging to God. As Daniel teaches, those written in the book will be delivered on the last day, raised to everlasting life, but those who have done evil will know “shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:1–2).

20:13 None of the powers of the world, those that terrify human beings, can withstand the voice of God or his power. The sea, Death, and Hades yield their dead (cf. *1 En.* 51:1). The sea here is not a neutral entity but represents chaos and destruction, which explains its absence in the new creation (Rev. 21:1). John reiterates that

the dead are judged according to their works (cf. Ps. 28:4; John 5:28–29; cf. also *Sir.* 16:12). God’s judgment is impartial and fair, not arbitrary or spiteful. It accords with what is right and true; no one will question its veracity.

20:14 There is no doubt that the end of history has arrived as Death and Hades are cast into the lake of fire. Death is the last enemy (1 Cor. 15:26), and Hades represents the realm of death and final punishment. Everything opposing God is confined to the lake of fire (cf. Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14), defined as the second death. Death is absent from the new creation, along with the pain and sorrow it brings (cf. 21:4). The promise of Isaiah 25:8 has now become a reality: “He will swallow up death forever.” The first death is separation from God, sealed by physical death (cf. Rom. 5:12; 6:23). But the second death is eternal separation from God, as his enemies are cast into a place of torment forever and ever (Rev. 14:9–11).

20:15 If one’s name is not inscribed in the book of life, he is cast into the lake of fire. Matthew describes the place of punishment as a “fiery furnace,” a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:42, 50). Matthew also tells us the “eternal fire” is “prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41). The punishment here is not temporary; John has made it very clear that the wicked suffer torment forever; they will never enjoy rest (Rev. 14:9–11). Again, Matthew confirms this reading, for the righteous will enjoy “eternal life” while the wicked will suffer “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). The parallel in Matthew shows that the punishment is permanent, just as the life enjoyed by the righteous lasts forever: those whose works testify that they truly belong to God will be vindicated at the great white throne; their names will be in the book of life.

Response

Final judgment is according to works, as this text clearly teaches. Such a teaching seems strange to some believers, who even wonder if it contradicts the gospel of grace—that we are justified by faith alone. But, as we saw in Revelation 20:12 above (cf. also 1 Cor. 6:9–11; Gal. 5:24; 6:8; James 2:14–26; 2 Pet. 1:5–11; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:4–10), the notion of good works as necessary for final reward is a pervasive theme in the NT. Those who practice evil and give themselves to it will not enjoy eternal life but will find themselves in the lake of fire. What John teaches here does not contradict justification by faith alone, for John is not teaching that good works earn or merit eternal life, nor is he claiming them as the basis for final reward—the gift of life is free (cf. Rev. 21:6; 22:17). True faith expresses itself in a changed life—though not a perfect life, to be sure—revealing the transformation taking place by God’s grace. Those who live in the same way they did before conversion reveal that they never truly belonged to God (cf. Matt. 7:23; 1 John 2:19).

REVELATION 21:1–8

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place¹ of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people,² and God himself will be with them as their God.³ ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

⁵And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. ⁷The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. ⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

¹ Or *tabernacle* ² Some manuscripts *peoples* ³ Some manuscripts omit *as their God*

Section Overview

The book takes a major turn in chapter 21, for now the new creation—the new heaven and earth—has arrived. The new creation is announced in verses 1–5, and those who enjoy the new creation and those who are excluded from it are described in verses 6–8. In 21:9–22:5 the new creation is described in visionary and apocalyptic language, expanding upon the announcement here in 21:1–5. The previous passage (20:11–15) serves as the bridge to the new creation, as those thrown into the lake of fire are excluded from the new creation, whereas those in the book of life (20:15) are included. Verse 1 of chapter 21 continues John’s vision, and he sees a new heaven and a new earth; the old heaven and earth are no more. The new creation is also described as the new Jerusalem (v. 2), representing heaven coming to earth. The new Jerusalem is further described as a bride dressed for her husband. Is the new creation a people or a place? It is both—people and place, community and new creation, bride and domicile. A loud voice from God’s throne declares that God’s covenant with his people has been fulfilled (v. 3). God will dwell with his people and be God to them, and they will be his people. All the wretched realities of the old creation have passed away: mourning, death, and pain

(v. 4). The first things are over; the last things have arrived in their fullness. God, seated on his throne, declares he is making all things new (v. 5), and these words are affirmed as true and trustworthy. The text transitions to those who will enjoy the new creation. God announces that all has been fulfilled (v. 6). His purposes have been realized from beginning to end, for he is the Alpha and the Omega. All who are thirsty will drink freely of the water of life. The one who conquers will be an heir, and God will be his father (v. 7). By contrast, those who give themselves over to evil will experience the second death, the lake of fire (v. 8).

Section Outline

X. The New Heavens and New Earth (21:1–22:5)

A. All Things New (21:1–8)

Comment

21:1 The new creation promised in the OT (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13) has finally become a reality. Isaiah promises the new creation in two texts: “I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isa. 65:17); and, “As the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your offspring and your name remain” (Isa. 66:22). When John speaks of a new heaven and new earth, he does not mean the old creation is annihilated. The parallel 2 Peter 3:7, 10–13 passage should be interpreted to mean the old creation is purified and renewed; the old creation is not blotted out of existence. The new creation, then, is a renewal and transformation of the old. The first heaven and earth pass away in the sense of being transformed and cleansed of all evil (cf. comment on Rev. 20:11). When John says the sea is no more, he does not mean there are no bodies of water in the new creation. The sea in Hebrew thought stood for chaos and evil, the source of hideous monsters (cf. Dan. 7:3; Isa. 27:1; 51:9–10; Rev. 11:7; 13:1). For instance, the flood—i.e., the sea—destroyed all life on the land in the days of Noah (cf. Pss. 42:7; 69:1; Jonah 2:3). That the sea is no more means nothing destructive and deforming will be in the new creation (cf. Job 38:8; Ps. 74:13).

21:2 The new creation that dawns is a city, a holy city of no unrighteousness or evil, consecrated and dedicated to God (cf. Isa. 52:1; Rev. 11:2). It stands in stark contrast to Babylon, a detestable prostitute. The city of God is identified as the new Jerusalem. It is not the earthly Jerusalem but a transcendent one, coming down from heaven, from God. The earthly Jerusalem pointed forward to a heavenly Jerusalem far surpassing the one located in Israel. Other NT writers refer to Jerusalem in a similar way. Paul speaks of the “Jerusalem above,” calling it “our mother” (Gal. 4:26), and Hebrews refers to a heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22; cf. comment on Rev. 3:12). A new and heavenly Jerusalem is anticipated in the OT and in Second Temple literature of the day (cf. Heb. 11:10, 13–16). This language is apocalyptic, and we should not see it as a literal description of the coming new

creation. The heavenly city stands in contrast to the earthly city of Babylon, which defaced the world and dehumanized others.

The city is also described as a beautiful bride adorned for her husband. Isaiah anticipates what John writes here about Jerusalem:

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. (Isa. 62:4–5)

The question arises as to whether the new creation, the new Jerusalem, is a place or a people. Both options are possible, but perhaps the best answer is that it is both. The new creation is like a city, with all the beauty and excitement sparked by a bustling metropolis. At the same time, the new creation also means the formation of a people, described as a radiant and perfect bride (cf. Rev. 19:7; Isa. 61:10; Eph. 5:26–27). The coming new world includes both a people and a place.

21:3 A loud voice is heard from the throne, declaring that God's dwelling, his tabernacle (*skēnē*), is with human beings (cf. 7:15). God will dwell (*skēnōsei*), i.e., "tabernacle," with his people forever. In the OT, the Lord specially dwelt in the tabernacle (cf. Exodus 25–31, 35–40; Lev. 26:11–12; Zech. 2:10–11) and the temple (1 Kings 6:1–38; 8:12–13; Psalm 84), but the tabernacle and temple pointed to something greater (cf. 1 Kings 8:27). Jesus himself is the new temple (John 1:14; 2:19–22), and the Spirit indwells the church of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). Now, in the new creation, he dwells in the new Jerusalem, and the whole world, the entire universe, is his temple. As we shall see shortly, both God and the Lamb will be the new temple (Rev. 21:22). The covenant formula of the OT is now realized fully (cf. Gen. 17:8; Ex. 29:45, 46; Lev. 26:44, 45; 2 Sam. 7:24; Jer. 31:1, 33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 37:23, 27), for the redeemed will be God's "peoples" (*laoi*; cf. ESV mg.) and God will be their God. The plural "peoples" is significant, denoting the diversity of the people of God. The fulfillment of God's promises is not limited to Israel but includes all peoples, just as he said to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 18:18). The greatest blessing of the new creation is the presence of God with his people. What makes the new creation so thrilling is fellowship with the living God: Father, Son, and Spirit.

21:4 The sorrow and sin of the old creation do not continue in the new creation (a theme anticipated already in the book; cf. 7:17, e.g.); all the troubles and pain that bedevil human beings are absent in the new Jerusalem (cf. Isa. 43:19). Every tear will be removed; there will be no occasions for mourning, crying, or pain. Death is dethroned and defeated as the last enemy (cf. 1 Cor. 15:26). Since death is part of the former things thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14), the story of the new creation is one of life and fruitfulness and a deep and lasting joy transcending

and surpassing any joy we have tasted in this world. We cannot improve on the way Isaiah describes future joy: “Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isa. 35:10; cf. 51:11; 65:19).

21:5 The old things have passed away, and the one who sits on the throne (cf. 4:2, 9; 5:1; 20:11), who rules and reigns over history and has appointed its end, declares he is making everything new (cf. Isa. 43:19; 2 Cor. 5:17). We could call this a performative statement, for the words of God are effective. What he *declares* to be new *becomes* new, just as the words of a minister declaring a couple husband and wife effect a new reality. It is particularly important that those who belong to God believe the words spoken here. If they doubt that a new world is coming, they will be prone to side with the old world, with the harlot and the beast and the false prophet and the Devil. But if they trust the words contained here, they will sacrifice everything to be part of the coming new world. It is important that the words be written so that they are not forgotten but are preserved for future generations. What is written is true and reliable, as is the case with every word of God (cf. Rev. 22:6).

21:6 God declares to John that all is accomplished; history has come to an end (cf. 10:6; 11:17). Everything God has purposed has been realized, and the new creation has dawned. God’s purposes are realized because he is the sovereign God, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (cf. 1:8; 22:13). He has always ruled and reigned as the God of the universe; things were never spinning out of his control. He declares from the very beginning what the end will be, and his purposes and plans are never frustrated (Isa. 46:9–11).

The joys of knowing God and having him dwell in one’s midst belong to those who are thirsty (Isa. 49:10), who long to be satisfied with God and are tired of relying on themselves and their good works (cf. Isa. 55:1; Zech. 14:8; John 4:10; 7:37; Rev. 7:16–17; 22:1, 17). God freely quenches the spiritual thirst and longing of human beings; the water of life is a gift that comes with the asking. People do not have to work or show they are worthy of it. All they need to do is to desire it.

21:7 Those who thirst, those who receive the free gift, also conquer and overcome. The necessity of conquering is a major theme in Revelation (cf. comment on 2:7). Eternal life is free, but those who receive it freely also conquer. The gift received empowers those who drink freely to overcome the beast, the harlot, and everything opposed to God. Hence they will “have this heritage [*klēronomēsei*],” probably a reference to inheriting the blessings of the new creation in verses 1–6. In the NT, the verb *klēronomeō* is typically used with reference to eschatological blessing: inheriting the earth (Matt. 5:5), eternal life (Luke 10:25; 18:18), the kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:21), the imperishable body (1 Cor. 15:50), salvation (Heb. 1:14), and blessing (1 Pet. 3:9). Here John speaks generally of eschatological blessing. What is clear is that there is no life in the age to come, no enjoyment of the new creation, unless one overcomes. The next line establishes this. Those who overcome

have God as their father, and they will be his sons. The text is especially close to 2 Samuel 7:14, where David's heir is called a son of God. Israel was also God's son (cf. Ex. 4:22; Isa. 43:6; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 1:10; 11:1), and now those who belong to Jesus Christ are sons of God (cf. Rom. 8:14, 15; 2 Cor. 6:18; Gal. 3:26; 4:6). The covenant relationship God promised to Israel now belongs to all those who are members of the people of God.

21:8 Those who conquer will inherit the new creation as God's sons and daughters. On the other hand, those who fail to conquer and instead give themselves over to evil will be in the lake burning with fire and sulfur (19:20; 20:10, 14, 15)—they will experience the second death (cf. 2:11; 20:6, 14). The first death is the initial separation from God experienced by all those born into the world as sons and daughters of Adam (Rom. 5:12–19; cf. Rom. 6:23). The second death, however, is eternal separation from God, and there is no redemption or salvation for those who experience the second death; they will be tormented forever (Rev. 14:9–11). Unbelievers are excluded from the city for cowardice and unbelief. Cowardice expresses itself in conforming to and following the beast instead of risking one's life for allegiance to Jesus. Unbelief or unfaithfulness means trusting in one's own resources instead of staking one's life on God. Murder and sexual immorality also separate one from God. It is not as if these sins automatically exclude anyone; the point is that one is excluded by engaging in such sins instead of repenting and turning from them (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:9; Rev. 22:15). Sorcery or magic is regularly condemned (Ex. 7:11, 22; 8:18; Isa. 47:9, 12; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 18:23; cf. *Wisd. Sol.* 12:4; 18:13) as a way of trying to manipulate circumstances to bring about one's desired ends instead of trusting in God. Idolatry, like sorcery, represents rejection of God's lordship (cf. Rom. 1:21–25). Liars do not trust God's providence in their lives and thus distort the truth to accomplish their own desires and schemes.

Response

Sometimes we wonder if trust in Christ and faithfulness to God is worth it. John reminds us that the new creation is truly coming. No more melanoma, no more multiple sclerosis, no more murder, no more indescribable loneliness accompanied by weeping, no more pain of having one's head sawed off by the enemies of God. And the greatest joy, the greatest reward, is the presence of God himself. The universe will be his temple; he will dwell in the entire cosmos. We will enjoy the glory of his presence in a way that is undiminished and far surpasses what we enjoy now. All that is tawdry and defiled and unclean will pass away, and we will dwell in the new Jerusalem forever.

REVELATION 21:9–22:5

⁹Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” ¹⁰And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. ¹²It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed— ¹³on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. ¹⁴And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

¹⁵And the one who spoke with me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. ¹⁶The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. And he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 stadia.¹ Its length and width and height are equal. ¹⁷He also measured its wall, 144 cubits² by human measurement, which is also an angel’s measurement. ¹⁸The wall was built of jasper, while the city was pure gold, like clear glass. ¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city were adorned with every kind of jewel. The first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, ²⁰the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. ²¹And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass.

²²And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. ²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, ²⁵and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. ²⁶They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. ²⁷But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

22 Then the angel³ showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb ²through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life⁴ with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. ³No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. ⁴They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And night will be no more. They will need no

light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

¹ About 1,380 miles; a *stadion* was about 607 feet or 185 meters ² A *cubit* was about 18 inches or 45 centimeters ³ Greek *he* ⁴ Or *the Lamb*. In the midst of the street of the city, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life

Section Overview

John steps back to describe the new Jerusalem in symbolic language that fits the apocalyptic nature of the passage. The angel says he will show John the bride of the Lamb (Rev. 21:9), but, as in 21:1–2, we are surprised because John is shown the holy city of Jerusalem coming down from God (21:10). The glory of the city is described (21:11), including its wall and gates (21:12–14). The city includes the people of God from both the OT and the NT. The measurements of the city are given in verses 16–17—it is a perfect cube, like the Most Holy Place in the temple (21:16), and the wall measures 144 cubits (21:17). The materials of the wall and the city are explained (21:18–21): the wall is made of jasper and the city of gold (21:18), and beautiful stones are laid as its foundation (21:19–20). The twelve gates of the city are a single pearl, and the streets are gold (21:21).

In verses 22–25 surprising characteristics of the city are set forth. There is no temple, for God and the Lamb are the temple (21:22). Nor is there need for sun or moon, since God and the Lamb illumine the city (21:23). The nations will walk in the light of the city, and its gates will never be shut, for night will never fall (21:24–25). The city will be full of the glory of the nations, and nothing defiled or evil will be in the city, for it is reserved for those whose names are written in the book of life (21:26–27).

As we come to chapter 22, John continues to describe the city. The river of life flows in the city from God's throne and from the Lamb (22:1), and the tree of life grants healing to the nations (22:2). Nothing cursed will be in the city, for God's throne and the Lamb will be there, and his people will worship him (22:3). We will see God's face—the greatest joy of all (22:4)—and night will never descend again, for the Lord will be our light, and the saints will reign forever (22:5).

Section Outline

- X. The New Heavens and New Earth (21:1–22:5) . . .
 - B. The Bride and the Holy City (21:9–22:5)

Comment

21:9 One of the angels holding the seven bowls (cf. 15:1–16:21) approaches John and speaks to him. This time he shows John a beautiful and entrancing vision, summoning him to see the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Earlier John had referred to the bride and the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7–8) and compared the new Jerusalem to a bride dressed for her husband (21:2). He now sees the church as a bride of unrivaled beauty.

21:10 John is carried away in the Spirit of prophecy (cf. comment on 1:10) to a great and high mountain, just as Ezekiel was brought to a mountain to see the building of a city-temple: “In visions of God he brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south” (Ezek. 40:2). God often discloses himself to his servants, from Sinai onward, on a mountain. We see the fulfillment of Ezekiel’s vision here in Revelation, as the whole world is God’s temple. There is no literal temple, but the temple (the universe where God dwells) is portrayed as a city. Hence, it is clear that a proper interpretation of Ezekiel 40–48 does not foresee the building of a literal temple. Ezekiel’s vision of the temple is highly symbolic, pointing to God’s presence among his people. Just as the Spirit inspired Ezekiel to see the glory of God in the temple (Ezek. 43:5), so too the Spirit lifts John up to see God’s glory in the new temple. The fulfillment of Ezekiel’s prophecy is the new creation, the new world, where God’s glory dwells in his temple (the entire universe). Here John sees the holy city, Jerusalem (cf. *Tob.* 13:9), coming down from heaven. The transcendent and heavenly character of the city is emphasized, as John adds that it is from God.

As in Revelation 21:2, the new Jerusalem is linked with the people of God; once again the city designates both a people and a place. Everything said about Jerusalem and Zion in the OT (cf. comments on 3:12; 21:2) is fulfilled in the heavenly Jerusalem, the city where God dwells. This city stands in contrast to Babylon, the harlot city, which John was earlier carried away in the Spirit to see. In contrast, Jerusalem is clean and holy and stunningly beautiful—not a prostitute but a faithful and chaste bride.

21:11 The beauty of the heavenly Jerusalem is breathtaking; it shimmers with the glory of God (Isa. 58:8; 60:1–2, 19; Ezek. 43:2–5; Rev. 21:23; 22:5). Its radiance and loveliness are comparable to jewels of exquisite color and brightness. The city is like a rare piece of jasper and shines as clear as crystal.

21:12–13 John continues to describe the city, telling us it has a massive, high wall and twelve gates. In the ancient world, a wall protected a city from enemies, so this high wall symbolizes the city’s safety from all enemies (cf. Ezek. 40:5). The wall also has twelve gates: three each on the east, north, south, and west (cf. Luke 13:29). At the gates are twelve angels, again suggesting the city is protected from anything that would destroy it. On the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The number twelve is almost certainly symbolic, signifying that the OT people of God are in the city. The promise that Israel would be restored has been fulfilled in the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. We think also of Exodus 28:21 and 39:14, where the twelve tribes of Israel are represented by twelve stones in the high priest’s ephod, again suggesting protection for the people of God.

21:14 John’s attention returns to the city wall; it has twelve foundations, inscribed with the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Jesus chose twelve apostles for his ministry (Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:14–19; Luke 6:13–16), the number twelve sig-

nifying the apostles as the nucleus of the new people of God, the new Israel. Paul says something quite similar, calling the apostles and NT prophets the foundation of God's new temple (Eph. 2:20), the cornerstone of the church of Jesus Christ. John is likewise teaching that the one people of God is grounded on the apostolic testimony. There are not two peoples of God (Israel and the church) but one people, now that the new covenant is realized in its fullness. As the OT points forward to, anticipates, and is fulfilled in the NT, the people of God are centered on the revelation of Jesus Christ mediated through apostolic testimony (cf. 1 John 1:1–4).

21:15–16 The one speaking with John, presumably the angel of Revelation 21:9, had a golden measuring rod in his hand to measure the city and its gates and walls. Measuring the city signifies that it is protected and safe (cf. 11:1). The city is built foursquare, having the same length and width. When measured, the city is 12,000 stadia, which some versions translate into modern measurements; the NRSV, e.g., reads “fifteen hundred miles.” Departing from the 12,000 stadia in the translation is a mistake, however, obscuring the symbolism of the number twelve multiplied by one thousand; the size of the city dwarfs any conceivable city and is far larger than the country of Israel. In other words, John is not saying the city is literally fifteen hundred miles, a ridiculously large size.³¹ Instead, he is communicating that the city is a perfect place to reside. This symbolic nature is evident from the next phrase, for the city is a perfect cube—its length, width, and height are equal (cf. Ezek. 45:2). This evokes the Most Holy Place in the temple, which was also a perfect cube: “twenty cubits long, twenty cubits wide, and twenty cubits high” (1 Kings 6:20). This indicates not that the city is literally fifteen hundred miles, but that it is like a massive Most Holy Place. The city is where God dwells! The entire universe is like the Most Holy Place of the temple.

21:17 The wall of the city, noted in verses 12–14, is featured again and measured. It is difficult to know if the height or the width of the wall is in view, though it is probably the former. The measurement is clearly symbolic, for the wall is 144 cubits, or twelve times twelve. The symbolism is even clearer from the next statement, for John says the 144 cubits is a human measurement, but also the measurement of the angel. Referring to the measurement of angels is very strange. John does not expect readers to say, “Of course, that makes sense. It is the measurement angels use.” Instead, by appealing to the measurement employed by angels, he is signaling to the readers that this is symbolism—none of us knows angelic measurements! The great height or thickness of the wall symbolizes absolute safety and security; no one can breach or get over the top of this wall. The city is a walled city (like most cities in the ancient world) and is therefore impregnable.

21:18 The wall is built of jasper, and the city is pure gold and like clear glass. Why is this important? Clear glass was very unusual in the ancient world, since the technology to make it was rare. Most glass was opaque and therefore difficult to see

³¹ It is not clear if the figure refers to the length or to the perimeter of the city. Either way, the city is massive.

through. Both the wall and the city, then, are indescribably beautiful. Those who dwell in the city will be ennobled by its superb artistry and eye-catching splendor. The city reflects the glory and beauty of God himself.

21:19–21 The wall of the city, as we have already seen, has twelve foundations and twelve gates (vv. 12–14), and the number twelve, as we have repeatedly seen in Revelation, is symbolic. Verses 19–20 describe the foundations, and verse 21 the gates. The foundations of the city consist of twelve different kinds of beautiful jewels. We should probably not read significance into each jewel specifically—they simply drive home the beauty of the city and echo Isaiah’s description of future Jerusalem: “I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of agate, your gates of carbuncles, and all your wall of precious stones” (Isa. 54:11–12). The jewels also remind us of the twelve stones on the high priest’s breastplate symbolizing the tribes of Israel, whom the high priest represents before the Lord (Ex. 28:17–20; cf. Ezek. 28:13). Each gate of the city is made of a single pearl, and the streets are of gold comparable to transparent glass. These symbols communicate the perfection of the new creation, the glory of God in it, and the purity of his people.

21:22 John relays some surprising features of the new creation. It is quite striking that he sees no temple in the city. Instead, the temple is Almighty God and the Lamb. In the portrayal of the new creation in 7:15, John had said that believers “serve [God] day and night in his temple.” We have no contradiction here—the whole new creation is God’s temple, in which his people serve Almighty God and the Lamb as they abide together. This also speaks to the Lamb’s equivalence with God, showing him to be fully God, sharing his very nature.

21:23 In the new creation there is no need for illumination by sun or moon (cf. Isa. 24:23; 2 *Esd.* 7:39, 42), for the light will stream from the glory of God (cf. 21:11; 22:5), and the lamp for the world will be the Lamb. This statement perhaps refers not to physical illumination but to the true enlightenment flowing from God and the Lamb, fulfilling the words of Isaiah: “The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give you light; but the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, nor your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended” (Isa. 60:19–20). It is striking that John calls upon a text typically understood by many to refer to the millennium and applies it to the new heaven and new earth, suggesting the language of the OT prophets is fulfilled fundamentally in the new creation in a way that is not necessarily “literal”—he is not necessarily saying there will be no celestial lights in the new earth.

21:24 John again appropriates Isaiah 60, seeing its fulfillment in the new creation. The nations will walk by the glory and light streaming from the Lord and the Lamb (cf. Isa. 60:3). Everyone in the heavenly city will be illumined and strengthened by the Lord. As Psalm 36:9 says, “In your light do we see light.” Life can be lived only in

the light of the Lord, for he is our “light” and “salvation” (Ps. 27:1). In John’s Gospel, we read that in Jesus “was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4), for he is the “light of the world” (John 8:12). The kings of the nations will also bring their glory into the city (cf. Ps. 72:10). As Isaiah 60:5 says, “The wealth of the nations shall come to [Jerusalem]” (cf. Ps. 68:29), while Isaiah 60:11 declares, “People [will] bring to you the wealth of the nations.” It seems John is saying that every good and beautiful thing from the old creation will be in the new creation. Nothing of beauty will be lost. Instead, it will be present in a perfected and incorruptible way.

21:25 We have seen earlier that the wall of the new Jerusalem is impregnable, unbreachable (21:12, 17). Now we are told the gates of the wall are always open, another fulfillment of Isaiah 60: “Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut” (Isa. 60:11). The apocalyptic and symbolic character of Revelation is clearly evident, for there is no use having a high and thick wall if the gates are open all the time! Believers in the heavenly city are so safe that the gates of the city are never shut. There are no enemies on the outside, for they are confined to the lake of fire. The gates are not open to welcome those from hell, as some argue—we find no suggestion in the book that some in the lake of fire migrate to the heavenly city.

John also addresses the dangers associated with darkness and night, for at night enemies creep near and attack without being observed. But there is no need to fear, for night never comes (cf. Rev. 22:5). John draws on Zechariah 14:7, which records what will happen on the day of the Lord: “There shall be a unique day, which is known to the LORD, neither day nor night, but at evening time there shall be light.” John is not speaking literally about whether there is darkness in the new creation (cf. Rev. 22:5); darkness stands for evil. Thus evil is completely absent in the new creation; there is nothing that can remove the peace and security and goodness of what is to come, for the glory of God and the lamp of the Lamb provide unending light to the city.

21:26 John reverts to the message of verse 24, saying that the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into the new Jerusalem. No one should fear that anything good or delightful will be lacking. Indeed, it will be present to an even greater degree. Again, we should not read this to say that good things are continually brought into the city, nor that those who are evil can change their status and eventually enter the city.

21:27 Everything good, and nothing defiled or anyone who does what is detestable or false, will be in the city (cf. 22:15). There are many OT prophecies that nothing unclean will be present when God brings his kingdom. Isaiah 35 looks forward to return from exile and the coming of the kingdom, declaring that the unclean will not be on the highway to Zion (Isa. 35:8). No one uncircumcised or unclean will enter the city of God (Isa. 52:1). Joel also promises that, in the day of the Lord, Jerusalem will be holy, and strangers will not enter (Joel 3:17; cf. Ezek. 44:9).

Zechariah envisions a day when “Every pot in Jerusalem and Judah shall be holy” (Zech. 14:21). Only those inscribed in the Lamb’s book of life will be in the city (cf. Rev. 17:8; 20:12, 15; 22:19; cf. Isa. 4:3); they will enter the gates of the city because they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 7:14; 22:14).

22:1–2 Both Zechariah (14:8) and Ezekiel (47:1) prophesy that in the last days a river will flow from Jerusalem and the temple. The image of the river is used to describe replenishment and refreshment for God’s people. As Psalm 46:4 says, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.” We see the ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies in Revelation. This is no ordinary river—it has the “water of life” (cf. John 4:10; 7:37). It is as clean and bright as crystal, unsullied by pollutants; it flows from God’s throne and the Lamb and runs down “the middle of the great street of the city,” showing that life comes from God and the Lamb. John seems to say that one or more trees of life stand on each side of the river, harking back to Genesis (Gen. 2:9; 3:17, 22, 24; cf. Rev. 2:7; 22:14, 19; cf. comment on Rev. 2:7). The tree yields twelve kinds of fruit, and its leaves are “for the healing of the nations,” echoing Ezekiel 47:12: “On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither, nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (cf. *2 Esd.* 7:123). This allusion to Ezekiel is especially significant because it comes from a chapter describing the new temple. We see again that the temple prophecy in Ezekiel refers to the new heavens and earth—where there is no literal temple! In the new creation is full and constant replenishment—a river to refresh and enliven, and a tree of life that never grows old or rotten, whose leaves reinvigorate the people of God.

22:3 After Adam and Eve sinned, the ground was cursed and they were expelled from the garden and banned from the tree of life (Gen. 3:17, 22–24). We saw in the previous verse that the tree of life is given to the saints, and now John affirms that there is nothing cursed in the heavenly city, for all its members have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 1:5; 7:14). The freedom from curse accords with Zechariah’s vision of Jerusalem: “There shall never again be a decree of utter destruction. Jerusalem shall dwell in security” (Zech. 14:11). Remarkably, God’s throne is shared by the Lamb (cf. Jer. 3:17)—he shares God’s identity. Their throne is in the new city, and thus God reigns in the new Jerusalem, the heavenly city, forever and ever. This fits with the end of Ezekiel’s vision of the temple in Jerusalem, which says the name of the city shall forever be, “The LORD Is There” (Ezek. 48:35). The presence of God is what sets the city apart (Rev. 7:15; 21:3, 23). When the saints see God as he is, they will worship him as Lord (cf. 7:15; 19:5); they will bow before their king and glorify him with gladness and inexpressible joy.

22:4 What makes the new creation new is the presence of God, and his servants will enjoy the greatest blessing imaginable: “They will see his face.” This is commonly

called the “beatific vision.” It is impossible to describe what this will be like, since none of us has yet experienced it. As Psalm 17:15 says, “I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.” The greatest agony in life is to be separated from God (Ps. 42:3), but those who are “pure in heart . . . shall see God” (Matt. 5:8; cf. 1 Cor. 13:12; 1 John 3:2). God’s name will be imprinted on the forehead of those who are his (cf. Rev. 3:12; 7:3; 14:1), just as the mark of the beast is on the forehead and hands of those who give themselves to evil (13:17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). John is not thinking literally, as if there were an actual mark on the forehead of God’s servants. The point is that God’s servants are identifiably his; they are God’s and will enjoy him forever.

22:5 John circles back to the theme of light, since there will be no night in the city (cf. 21:25; Isa. 60:19)—there will be no smidgen of evil in any corner. There is no need for lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be the light for his people (cf. Rev. 21:23). And God’s people will fulfill what was intended in the beginning; they will reign forever, fulfilling the mandate originally given to Adam (cf. also Dan. 7:18, 27; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:12). They will be kings and priests over the new creation (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; cf. 20:4; Rom. 5:17).

Response

The coming new world transcends our understanding and experience; John tries to describe the indescribable. The most important feature of the new world is not what we will do but whom we will see. The greatest joy in the new creation will be fellowship with God and the Lamb. John does not concentrate on our seeing and enjoying one another (though doubtless that will happen); he fixes our attention on the beauty of the city, and the city is lovely because the Lord is there (Ezek. 48:35). If our hearts do not thrill at the prospect of seeing God and the Lamb, we need to know God better, follow him more nearly, and love him more dearly. The psalmist knew the emptiness and ache and loneliness of the human heart that can be filled only with God (cf. Psalms 42–43; 62–63; 84). He is our true satisfaction and joy.

REVELATION 22:6–21

⁶And he said to me, “These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.”

⁷“And behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.”

⁸I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, ⁹but he said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God.”

¹⁰And he said to me, “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. ¹¹Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.”

¹²“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

¹⁴Blessed are those who wash their robes,¹ so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.

¹⁵Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

¹⁶“I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.”

¹⁷The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.

¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

²⁰He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

²¹The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.² Amen.

¹Some manuscripts *do his commandments* ²Some manuscripts *all the saints*

Section Overview

The book of Revelation began with a prologue (1:1–8) and ends with an epilogue. Many of the themes introduced in the prologue are repeated in the epilogue. This section does not seem tightly organized, but in it John makes a number of

observations highlighting what has been featured in the book and bringing it to conclusion. The reliability of the angel's revelation to John is emphasized, along with the nearness of fulfillment (22:6–7; cf. 1:1, 3). A blessing is pronounced on those who keep the prophecy (22:7; cf. 1:3). John is moved to worship the angel who revealed these matters to him but is instructed to worship God only (22:8–9). The prophecy should not be sealed, since the fulfillment is soon (v. 10), and those who practice evil and good will be assessed shortly (v. 11). The nearness of Jesus' coming is emphasized again, whereupon he will repay each according to works (v. 12). Jesus declares his rule over the beginning and end of history (v. 13). A blessing is pronounced on those who have washed their garments and have access to the tree of life and the city (v. 14), whereas those who practice evil are excluded (v. 15). Jesus sends his angel to bear witness to these matters to the churches, and he identifies himself as David's heir and the morning star (v. 16). All who read and hear these words are invited to come and drink freely of the water of life (v. 17). Those who add to or subtract from the words of the prophecy will not enter the holy city or eat from the tree of life (vv. 18–19). Jesus declares again that he is coming soon, and John prays that he will indeed come (v. 20). The book concludes with a grace benediction (v. 21).

Section Outline

XI. Epilogue (22:6–21)

Comment

22:6 As the book of Revelation comes to an end, the angel looks back at what John has revealed and written for the churches and declares it is trustworthy and true (cf. 21:5 and 19:9). These are the very words of God for the churches, and they must be heard, believed, and obeyed. We know they are true, for the same Lord who rules over the spirits of the prophets (cf. Num. 27:16; 1 Cor. 14:32), the God who inspired them to speak and write their words (e.g., Dan. 2:28–29, 45), has now sent his angel to show his servants what will soon come to pass. We recall the first verse of the book, also communicated to John by an angel, which announced God's revelation about and from Jesus Christ to his servants, to show them what would happen soon.

22:7 The speaker in verse 6 may be Jesus, though it could also be an angel (cf. 22:1). The speaker in 22:7, however, is clearly Jesus, for he says he is coming soon. The nearness of Jesus' coming and the fulfillment of what has been spoken and written pervade the book (cf. 1:1, 3; 2:16; 3:11; 22:6, 12, 20). How we should understand "soon" is discussed more fully in the comment on 1:1, but the passing of two thousand years does not mean John and/or Jesus was mistaken. The nearness of Jesus' coming is a relative term, for as Peter says, "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years" (2 Pet. 3:8). Every generation must be prepared for the Lord to return.

A blessing is then pronounced on those who keep the words of the prophecy contained in the book of Revelation.³² Again we have a striking parallel with the beginning of the book: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (Rev. 1:3). The flow of thought in 22:7 is clear. Since Jesus is coming soon, those who keep the words of the prophecy will be blessed—they will gain an eternal reward. Nothing in life is more important than receiving such a reward. Merely hearing the prophecies does not suffice; one must observe and keep what is prophesied.

22:8–9 John attests that he is the one who has heard and seen the visions (1:1, 4, 9). After hearing and seeing such remarkable things, he is overcome and bows to worship the angel who disclosed such things to him. The angel, however, rebukes him; he is a fellow servant along with John and the prophets and all who keep the instructions recorded in this book. He commands John to worship only God. Angels are glorious, and this is the second time John is commanded not to worship an angel (19:10; cf. Acts 10:25–26). The worship of Jesus as the Lamb stands out all the more starkly when we read these words, because believers and angels worship him throughout the book. Such worship is never criticized but always commended, for Jesus is truly God.

22:10 Since the time is near, it is imperative for John not to seal up or hide the words of the prophecy recorded in the book. We are reminded again that the book of Revelation is not merely apocalyptic but is also prophetic (cf. 1:3; 22:7, 18–19). Daniel was told to seal up his prophecy for the end of time (Dan. 12:4; cf. *1 En.* 82:1), but John must not seal up what he has written, for the end is at hand (cf. comment on Rev. 10:4).

22:11 The words of this verse are certainly among the most unexpected in the book, for here the unrighteous and the “filthy” are told to continue in their unrighteousness and filthiness, while the righteous and holy are to continue to be righteous and holy. Certainly this does not mean people should not repent of evil, for John clearly thinks people should do so (9:20–21; 16:9, 11). The shock of the statement is meant to prompt repentance, as in Amos’s command to “Come to Bethel, and transgress” (Amos 4:4). Furthermore, those who are evil are invited to come and drink freely of the water of life (Rev. 21:6; 22:17).

The command of verse 11 is not some fatalistic word, as if the evil *should* in fact pursue their wicked ways. Daniel 12:10 helps us understand what John means, which is not surprising, for John alluded to Daniel 12 in the previous verse. In referring to the time of the end Daniel 12:10 says, “Many shall purify themselves and make themselves white and be refined, but the wicked shall act wickedly. And none of the wicked shall understand, but those who are wise shall understand.” Here we have a clue as to John’s intention. The point is that Daniel’s prophecy is

³² For the importance of blessings in Revelation, cf. comment on 1:3.

being fulfilled; many of the wicked will never understand but will continue in their wickedness (cf. Isa. 6:9–10). Their incomprehension seems baffling to the righteous; it can even sow doubts in the hearts of the saints as to whether *they* are right in following the Lord. The problem, though, is not with any lack of clarity of truth but with wicked hearts. As Ezekiel 3:27 says, “He who will hear, let him hear; and he who will refuse to hear, let him refuse, for they are a rebellious house.” The parallel to Revelation is again striking, and Ezekiel clarifies that the wicked do not comprehend the truth because of their rebellion. The righteous should understand, then, that the evil have no desire to be cleansed of their filth or to depart from their unrighteousness. Hence the godly should not be deterred by the recalcitrance of the wicked but should continue to pursue righteousness and holiness. Paul expresses the same thought when he writes, “Evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13). The righteous should heed the mandate of Isaiah 56:1: “Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my righteousness be revealed.”

22:12 The importance of our actions in this life is again underscored and sharpened, for the end is near. The “I” who declares he is coming soon is almost certainly Jesus. The nearness of Jesus’ coming is emphasized a number of times in the book (cf. 1:1, 3; 3:11; 22:7, 20). Christians of every generation have rightly believed that Jesus might come during their lifetime, and hence the prophecy functions as promise and warning. The announcement provokes believers to be prepared for Christ’s return. When he returns, he will reward or repay all in accordance with what they have done. This theme was already emphasized in 20:12–13 (cf. 2:23), and, as we saw there, it accords with many biblical texts (e.g., Pss. 28:4; 62:12; Prov. 24:12; Isa. 40:10; 62:11; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; etc.). John heralds the freeness of the water of life (Rev. 21:6; 22:17) while insisting that those who drink from it must live in a way that pleases God.

22:13 Jesus, who is still presumably the speaker (cf. v. 12), now declares that he is the “Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Elsewhere *God* is the Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 21:6), but here Jesus is declared as such. Isaiah especially proclaims that God is the first and the last, that Yahweh is the true God, the only God (Isa. 41:4; 44:6–8; 48:12), who gives his glory to no other (Isa. 48:11). Yet Jesus is also identified as the first and the last (Rev. 1:17; 2:8), the beginning and the end (cf. Isa. 46:10). Clearly he has the same stature as God himself. Interestingly, this verse is nestled between two verses promising a future reward for believers. What is the logical relationship between these statements? Jesus is declaring that he has the stature and the power to reward and punish. The promise of a reward is not an idle promise, for the one who rules over all of history from beginning to end makes the promise. He will most certainly make good on his word.

22:14 The last of the seven blessings is enunciated here (cf. comment on 1:3). Those who wash their robes, who are clean from evil, have the right to eat from

the tree of life and enter the gates of the city (Ps. 118:19–20). The tree of life and entering the city are two different images for the life of the age to come. The tree of life was withheld from Adam and Eve because of their sin (Gen. 2:9; 3:17, 22, 24), but now it is given to those who enjoy life in the garden to come, the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7). Garden images are juxtaposed with the bustling life of the city, which seems strange to us, but both pictures communicate the wonder of new life in store for those who have clean robes. The robes of believers are clean because they have washed them in the Lamb's blood (7:14). No one is able to remove his defilement by his own efforts. At the same time, clean robes stand for those who, having once been cleansed by the Lamb, have walked in white and have conquered (3:4–5). Those who are truly clean must live lives of virtue.

22:15 Not everyone eats of the tree of life, for some are outside the city. We have seen this pattern before in Revelation. Some drink from the water of life and become heirs (21:6–7), while others pursue evil and are punished in the lake of fire (21:8). John gives us a sample of those who are outside the city. He mentions dogs first, unclean animals (cf. Ex. 22:31; Isa. 66:3) who went about in packs to ravage and scavenge (1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:19; Ps. 59:6, 14; Prov. 26:11). By NT times, “dogs” was used to designate Gentiles (Matt. 7:6; 15:26, 27; Mark 7:27, 28; cf. Phil. 3:2), those outside the people of God. The appellation “dogs,” therefore, refers to those who have unwashed robes (Rev. 22:14), who are unclean in God's sight. John also mentions sorcerers (cf. comment on 21:8), who try to manipulate circumstances with magic instead of trusting God, and the sexually immoral and murderers, who violate God's commands (Ex. 20:13–14). Those who give themselves to sexual sin do not entrust their bodies to God but seek out pleasure in accord with their own desires. Those who murder deface another person made in God's image and take justice into their own hands. Idolaters are also excluded, for they certainly cannot inhabit a city characterized by the presence of a God they despise and refuse to serve. Lastly, those who love and practice lying are outside the city. This may be an indictment of those who claim to be Christians but deny their profession by their lives. The expression strikes even to the desires of the heart; indeed, the practice of lying has its roots in loving what is not true, and those who love and practice falsehood cannot be in the heavenly city. The city is a place where the clarity of truth shines and no lie is tolerated. The truth centers on God and the Lamb, and those who love lying hate both.

22:16 As the book rushes to a close, the importance of what is written is stressed. Jesus himself addresses the audience, underscoring that he sent an angel (cf. 1:1, 4) to testify about these matters to the churches. These are urgent words of the risen Christ for all the churches. What is emphasized is the message of the Messiah: he is the root and heir of David (cf. Isa. 11:1, 10; 53:2). Jesus' messianic stature is quite important to John, playing a major role in the decisive chapter on Christ's redemptive work (Revelation 5; cf. esp. 5:5). Jesus is also the bright morning star (cf. 2:28), an allusion to Numbers 24:17, which prophesies, “A star shall come out

of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel.” This scepter and star will pulverize God’s enemies, a major theme of Revelation. The destruction of God’s enemies also means vindication for his people. It is difficult to know what the morning star refers to here. Perhaps it means Jesus reigns even now, even though his reign is not consummated. The star has risen, but we have not yet seen it shine in all its brightness.

22:17 The key word of the verse is “come.” It is difficult to know if the audience is invited to come to Jesus for salvation or if Jesus is invited to come again. Certainty is impossible. Many interpreters claim the first two invitations are addressed to Jesus and the third to believers. This is possible, but I lean toward all three being addressed to humans. It is a bit jarring if the subject of the coming shifts from Christ to human beings. The Holy Spirit, through the words of the book of Revelation and the bride of Christ (his church), invites people to come to Jesus to satisfy the thirst of their souls. In addition, those who hear the words of Revelation invite others to come. The urgency of the invitation is communicated by its threefold repetition. John pleads with his audience to come to Jesus before it is too late. Who is invited to come? Those who are thirsty, who long to be filled, who feel their need for Jesus (cf. 21:6). As Isaiah 55:1 says, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” Isaiah goes on to say they can buy and eat “without money and without price” (Isa. 55:1). So too here, the one who desires to come can “take the water of life without price.” To respond to the call to come is to give one’s life to Jesus, to crown him as one’s Lord. To those who do so, life is offered freely and openly. Nothing hinders anyone but his own desires, and he who comes will find his deepest longings satisfied, the thirst and ache in his heart filled by Jesus.

22:18 As the book concludes, Jesus sternly warns against adding to or subtracting from what is written in the book of Revelation. Those who hear the prophetic words must not add to them. We see Revelation again described as prophecy (cf. 1:3; 10:11; 19:10; 22:6, 7, 9, 10), and it must not be tampered with. Adding to the book changes the content of the prophecy and alters its message. To do so is to distort the word of God. As Deuteronomy 4:2 says, “You shall not add to the word that I command you,” and Deuteronomy 12:32 adds, “Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it.” How serious is it to add to the words of the prophecy in Revelation? It is of eternal significance, for on those who do so God will set the plagues described in this book (cf. 9:18, 20; 11:6; 15:1, 6, 8; 16:9, 21; 18:4, 8; 21:9; cf. Deut. 29:19). Clearly this is no trivial matter, for those who transgress will suffer eternal punishment.

22:19 To add to the prophetic words recorded in this book is not the only potential danger; there is also the danger of subtracting, of removing the words deposited and thus eliminating crucial elements of the message. Certain texts and themes may be cut away because they are distasteful or unattractive to readers. Still, readers have no right to alter the words of God, and those who subtract from the message

will be removed from the tree of life and the holy city (cf. comment on 2:7; cf. 3:12; 21:2, 10, 14, 15, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23; 22:2, 14). The admonition does not relate to textual criticism or legitimate questions of the wording of the biblical text. Nor does it prohibit exposition of Scripture, unfolding its meaning for readers and hearers. By extension, what is said here rightly applies to all of Scripture. Those who deliberately add to or subtract from God's Word so as to distort its message are threatened with eternal punishment.

22:20 The last words of Jesus in the book are recorded here. He is identified as the one who has witnessed to and verified the message communicated in the book. Jesus reminds his hearers of the eschatological urgency of the times. He affirms he is coming soon—the end is near. The message at the beginning of the book is reaffirmed at the end (cf. comments on 1:1; 1:3). History is short, and Jesus is at the door. John now speaks, affirming with his own voice (“Amen”) the near coming of Jesus and adding his own prayer, the prayer of every true believer: “Come, Lord Jesus.” If this is not the cry of our own hearts, we have not truly understood this book or the message of the NT.

22:21 The book of Revelation and the NT appropriately end with a grace wish. More specifically, grace from the Lord Jesus; it is not an abstract power or entity but flows from a person. Grace benedictions are pervasive in the NT books (e.g., Rom. 16:20; 1 Cor. 16:23; 2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 6:18; Eph. 6:24; Heb. 13:25), and it is fitting that the NT itself ends with a word of grace.

Response

We sometimes feel as if life as we know it will last forever, but we are reminded of the truth when we visit the emergency room or attend the funeral of a loved one or close friend. We are reminded by John in these last verses that the end is at hand—Jesus is coming soon. Our final destiny awaits us, whether the lake of fire or the tree of life, the second death or the heavenly city. As long as life lasts, we are invited to come, to drink freely from the water of life. All of us are thirsty; all of us are weak and empty and deficient. Jesus invites us to come to him, to humble ourselves and drink to our everlasting satisfaction. Come, Lord Jesus!

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