

“THE CLIMAX OF PROPHECY”

WEEK 1: SOVEREIGN PURPOSE

I usually don't say anything about the title slide, but 'R Bauckham' is up there because I have to confess I pinched the title for these talks from his book of that name. So to avoid any copyright problems for us, I've got to publicly acknowledge that. Thankfully, there are no such problems within Greenfield and so once more, it's great to be able to say that David's studies of Acts have provided an excellent introduction and background to these talks. One of the main points he made was that Pentecost, the Gospel message Peter preached on that day and the subsequent practice, growth and development of the church, including the missionary journeys of Paul, came as a result of the sovereign work of God. Those developments were God's way of revealing how He was going to gather a people together into a kingdom that would reach its culmination when the fifth and final day of the Lord came. Peter thought that had come at Pentecost, but only because the book of Revelation had not yet been written. But, as David said, the sermon preached on the day of Pentecost has been the pattern for Gospel preaching right to the present day. There will be no further revelation that will deviate from that pattern, for as we are reminded once again – in these last days God has spoken through His Son. (Hebrews 1:1ff). We are fortunate in not only having this revelation of the direction the church is to follow, but also what its end result will be.

Now, as you all know, the end of the world is what is uppermost in most people's minds when Revelation is mentioned. For example: If anybody was to walk about with a placard like this these days, I am guessing that the politically correct brigade would have the person arrested for offending somebody's sensibilities. Then think of "entertainment". According to the internet there are over 400 films about the end of the world. *Armageddon* predicts it coming through an asteroid colliding with earth. Pat Robertson, the American televangelist predicted this would happen during the last week of April this year. *The Stand* depicts the end as the final battle between good and evil fought by human beings. In the *Matrix* it comes by technology taking over the world: *The Sum of all Fears* and *Crimson Tide* depict the end coming through nuclear war. Climate change leading to a new ice age is the cause of the end in *The Day after Tomorrow*.

All of these are fictional scenarios, but there have been other perceptions which adhere more closely to reality. In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, Hal Lindsay led the way in predicting when the end of the world would be by observation of the world events. The nuclear threat, the establishment of the state of Israel, the growth of the European union to 10 states governed by the Treaty of Rome, which was where the anti-Christ would have his throne, were taken as signs of the end. Demand for oil would lead to Russia and China converging on the Middle East leading to Armageddon. None of us have to be told that all these

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predictions and even those that have been made more recently have never materialised. So I hope you won't be too disappointed to hear that these talks will not speculate on end times events. Much more important is how Revelation gives us portraits of the sovereignty of God and His Christ who alone can decide when and how the end will come.

As we have seen since last September, the sovereignty of God in human history has been the overarching theme of the whole of prophetic Scripture. Each pivotal 'Day of the Lord' has taken humanity a step closer to the 5th and final Day envisioned for us in Revelation.

Creation to the Assyrian conquest	= the story of God's chosen people up to the first Day of the Lord
From Assyrian to Babylonian conquest	= the story of Judah up to the second Day of the Lord
The period of the exile to restoration	= the story of the exiles up to the third Day of the Lord
Restoration to the Birth of Christ	= the story of the returning exiles up to the fourth Day of the Lord
Birth of Christ to the Second Coming	= the story of the whole world up to the fifth Day of the Lord

All the forth-telling and foretelling in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are revelations from God and reach their climax in Revelation, a fact that is immediately apparent in the very first verse.

Revelation 1:1

The revelation of Jesus Christ, WHICH GOD GAVE HIM to show his servants what must soon take place.

So, if we want to have a better understanding of what Revelation teaches, it is the rest of Scripture that points the way, particularly the Old Testament. This is also a point David, made and it is backed up by modern scholars who are now recognising the inextricable connection between the two Testaments. This becomes abundantly evident in the book of Revelation. Although they dispute the number of times the OT is referred to in Revelation, simply because different scholars use different criteria to calculate references, what they all are agreed on is that the book of Revelation contains more OT references than any other book in the New Testament – somewhere between 200 and 500. Beale's commentary on Revelation states on page 77: *“The OT in general plays such a major role that a proper understanding of its use is necessary for an adequate view of the Apocalypse as a whole.”* He goes on to say on page 97:

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“The OT provides the redemptive-historical background against which the apocalyptic visions are better understood; the New Testament interprets the Old and the Old interprets the New.”

It has been established that the major sources of the OT references are Daniel and Ezekiel, Isaiah and the Psalms, but many references come from other books as well. Also agreed is that John had a vision and to write it down, he would have drawn on his own religious tradition and knowledge, which would be largely shared by his audience. That audience would not only have knowledge of the Old Testament but would be living in the knowledge and practice of the Christ event as found in the witness of the New Testament writers, including John himself. Like other New Testament writers, where his vision coincided with OT knowledge, he used the language of those passages to record what he saw and heard. These are a couple of examples of how scholars came to this conclusion. No-one could deny the similarity of thought and action in these two verses.

Genesis 14:22

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have raised my HAND to the LORD, GOD MOST HIGH, CREATOR of heaven and earth and have taken an OATH....

Revelation 10:5-6

Then the angel I had seen standing on the sea and on the land raised his RIGHT HAND TO HEAVEN. And he SWORE by him who lives forever, who CREATED the heavens and all that is in them the earth and all that is in it and the sea and all that is in it.

And, because John’s vision takes into account the post-Old Testament Christ event and the emergence of the church, many of the Old Testament references are used in the light of his current situation. For example, in Genesis 19:15, Lot is urged to flee with his family from the doomed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

With the coming of dawn, the angels urged Lot saying, “Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when this city is punished.”

Revelation 18:4

Then I heard another voice from heaven say: “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins so that you will not receive any of her plagues.

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In Revelation 18:4, John uses this same exhortation to urge the people of God to desert the doomed city of Babylon. Babylon in Revelation represents any regime that sets itself up against God. Just as Babylon in the Old Testament was the nemesis of the people of Judah and was eventually destroyed, so at the end of time any human institution, system or regime opposing God or persecuting His people will suffer the same fate. The exhortation, in effect is saying, you cannot compromise with the world – you either accept the sovereign claims of God or you don't, because, for John, everything in this world is determined by the existence of God and His Christ.

So, to begin to understand Revelation that is where we too have to start. **“In the beginning God.....”** For John, God is sovereign in terms of existence and creative power. All the answers to questions about our existence and eventual end start with the existence of God. The answers themselves only make sense as we understand the unfolding revelation of God's plans for this world, literally from the eternity that existed before our concept of time to beyond our concept of time. And what existed in eternity, before the creation of the world, was a divine, sovereign plan and purpose for the creation that was to come into being. God has revealed that to us starting in Genesis to its climax in Revelation.

The explicit teaching of Scripture about God's purpose is that He wants to take us back to the point where His dwelling and relationship was with His human creation. The ultimate goal of redemptive-history is the restoration of the personal, face-to-face relationship God had established with a sinless humanity, in a perfectly harmonious environment. Salvation history is conforming to this divine purpose and is moving towards that end. That is the picture in the first two chapters of Genesis. That is the picture of the last two chapters of Revelation. It is a revelation that progresses from a Garden to a Garden-city.

The most significant point to be made about the Garden of Eden is the initial perfect harmony that existed between God, humanity and the natural environment. Genesis 2 and 3 shows how God walked in the Garden and talked with Adam and Eve. Whether we take this literally or not, we cannot deny the direct, personal relationship and communication that existed between God and His human creation. And it was a relationship that existed in a perfect natural environment. The Genesis account gives us a beautiful picture of a well-watered garden, filled with trees and vegetation.

Genesis 2:8-14

Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden....And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering

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the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.....the fourth river is the Euphrates.

This image of a peaceful garden landscape of trees, vegetation and water continues in the writings of the prophets. Ezekiel 36:35 gives the exiles the image of a restored Judah as:

And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste and desolate and ruined towns are now inhabited and fortified.”

Hosea 14:7 talks of the restored people of God.

They shall again live beneath my shadow, they shall flourish as a garden; they shall blossom like the vine, their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

Isaiah 58:11 is in the same vein

The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

Water retains its prominence as a divine life giving image throughout Scripture with Psalm 46:4 and Isaiah 33:21 anticipating John’s image of the river in the New Jerusalem.

Psalm46:4

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns.

Isaiah 33:21

But there the LORD in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass.

The Biblical imagery of trees and water reaches its climax in their appearance in Revelation 22:1-2

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

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The practical necessity of water and also its spiritual symbolic importance cannot be underestimated.

Isaiah 44:3. For I will pour WATER on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour MY SPIRIT upon your descendants, and my blessing on your offspring.

Jesus says in John 7:38 and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive;

But whosoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

In Revelation 7:17 Jesus is pictured as actually providing this service. **for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to SPRINGS OF THE WATER OF LIFE.....**

So while the fifth Day of the Lord environment is referred to as a city in Revelation, it embraces all the natural features of the Garden of Eden. The only exception in Revelation is the presence of animals. Although mention of animals is made subsequently in both the Old and New Testaments, they do fade into the background. Two references however, suggest the New Jerusalem will have a place for them. Isaiah envisages them as being present in God’s restored creation, giving us a picture of creaturely harmony in 11:6

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

One possible reason for the loss of prominence is because the world inhabited by the Biblical writers became more urbanised. Christianity, particularly, took root in the major towns and cities of the empire, where only domestic and sacrificial animals would have been common features. Nevertheless, Paul reminds us in Romans 8:22-23

We know that THE WHOLE CREATION has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

The whole of creation implies all the created elements in Eden, but Paul’s words also remind us that getting from the Garden to the City has not been a straightforward process. The Fall and expulsion from the Garden meant a plan

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of redemption had to be put in place. And that, too, started in Genesis. Genesis 3 refers to the problems of life to be faced in a fallen world. More importantly in prophetic terms, verses 14 and 15 define the spiritual battle that will rage on earth until the end of time. Cursing the serpent God said,

...And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel.

The enmity is between Satan and the woman because the One who would bruise his head would be born of a virgin. Satan would strike back by orchestrating His death on a cross. But, paradoxically, the cross would bring about the destruction of Satan. The imagery of Revelation chapter 12 depicts this enmity, the fall of Satan and its consequences for the fate of humanity until the final Day of the Lord comes.

Revelation 12:9

The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth and his angels with him.

In the imagery, the dragon fails to destroy the woman’s new born child because God provided protection. So he turns on the rest of her children as explained in verse 17

Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring – THOSE WHO OBEY GOD’S COMMANDMENTS AND HOLD TO THE TESTIMONY OF JESUS.

That means us. While we live in this world we are at the mercy of the world, the flesh and the devil, and at times, we will be overwhelmed and even defeated by them. The Fall broke the direct relationship between God and the first human beings and brought into being a battle that will last until the end of the world. But John follows the path of Scripture by giving us a graphic vision of what awaits those who ‘trust and obey’ the revelation already given in the Old Testament, and authenticated by the coming of Jesus. Genesis 14:18 gives us the first indication that there would come a time and a place, when God’s presence would once more become as direct as it was in Eden, which becomes the New Jerusalem.

Then Melchizedek KING OF SALEM brought out bread and wine. He was PRIEST OF GOD MOST HIGH.

Scholars regard this as a theophany. An appearance by God in the guise of a human being - significantly as King of Salem – the first mention of Jerusalem in

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the Bible. God made His presence real to the man He had chosen to become the father of the people of faith, who would eventually enter into the eternal presence of God at the end of time. And Jerusalem, from the time David brought the Ark of the Covenant to the city, right to the present day, has been regarded as “The Holy City,” where, in Judaism, God presence dwells with His people. John continues this concept combining Isaiah’s prophecy and New Testament prophecy of God’s presence with His people in a future Mount Zion.

Isaiah 12:6

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 35:10

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Hebrews 12:22-24

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, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

For me, just comparing the first two chapters of Genesis with the last two chapters of Revelation, gives me reason to believe that the sovereign purpose of God in creating the Garden of Eden and humanity in the first place, will ultimately be fulfilled when history has reached its climax, and the New Jerusalem is established. Hopefully, this introduction has shown that far from being a bizarre, stand-alone, difficult-to-understand text about end-time events, John’s visions summarise the whole of salvation-history, and brings together what Scripture teaches regarding the sovereignty of God. John leaves us with a breath-taking vision of the magnificence and glory of the completion of God’s sovereign purpose, one which His power ensures will come to pass. And, one which believers will see for themselves when the climax of prophecy comes on that fifth Day and final of the Lord.

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WEEK 2: SOVEREIGN POWER

I ended last week with John’s vision of the ultimate vision when God’s pre-existent purpose will finally be revealed for all to see. And it is only God’s sovereign power that can ensure that end will be glorious and magnificent. Our imaginations are stretched as we take in the images of a perfect environment and a perfect, contented, eternal existence. But when it comes to thinking of God’s sovereign power itself, our imagination takes a back seat. In many ways that is because direct references to the sovereignty of God are few and far between. Our minds simply accept the concept of an all-powerful God perhaps because the Biblical writers take both the existence of God and His sovereignty so much for granted that constant repetition is not necessary. But because both of these things underlie the whole of Scripture, serious consideration needs to be given to them because they are interdependent. The existence of God means that we need to take seriously His claim to sovereignty because the Biblical writers understood sovereignty to mean the same as we mean it today. It is supreme power and includes not only the right to supreme power, but the ability and capability to exercise that power.

Everything that is wrong about our world is the consequence of not first acknowledging and then submitting to the sovereignty of God. Adam and Eve did not do either, and condemned all creation through disobedience. What was done by individuals became more explicit corporately and publicly in 1 Samuel 8:7 where we are told God’s chosen people rejected His kingship.

and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

People’s rejection of God’s sovereignty however did not mean that it became null and void. If anything, Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, in one way or another, consistently points to the sovereignty of God and constantly reinforces, as fact, God’s ultimate control of this world and everything in it. That is why before any discussion of end-time events, the fact of God’s sovereign power has to take precedence over everything else. But there is a slight problem here.

As I said earlier, direct mentions of God’s sovereign power are not prominent in either the Old or the New Testaments. And using Revelation as the climax of Biblical references to divine, sovereign kingship also gives disappointing results. John explicitly identifies God as King only once in the angels’ song (Rev 15:3)

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

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The kingship of God and Christ occurs only twice. Again both come from voices in heaven.

Revelation 11:15

“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

Revelation 12:10

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: Now have come the salvation and the power of the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ.

More disturbingly, the term ‘sovereign’ is used of God only once and it comes from the mouths of the martyrs under the throne, not the writer of the book.

Revelation 6:10

they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”

This follows the pattern of the Old Testament writers, because there we find relatively few uses of the term ‘king’ is made in reference to God. Examples are to be found mainly in the Psalms with a few references in the prophets.

Psalm 95:3

For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.

Psalm 145:1

I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.

Isaiah 33:22

For the LORD is our judge, the LORD is our ruler, the LORD is our king; he will save us.

Isaiah 43:15

I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.

The same applies to the term ‘sovereign’, the only examples being:

Psalm 8:1

O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

Psalm 8:9

9 O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

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References occur 5 times in Isaiah where God is consistently called the Sovereign, the Lord of Hosts.

Isaiah 1:24

24 Therefore says THE SOVEREIGN, THE LORD OF HOSTS, the Mighty One of Israel:

God’s sovereignty is referred to 4 times in Daniel.

Daniel 4:3

How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his sovereignty is from generation to generation.

Daniel 4:17

The sentence is rendered by decree of the watchers, the decision is given by order of the holy ones, in order that all who live may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdom of mortals; he gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of human beings.’

Daniel 4:25-26

You shall be driven away from human society, and your dwelling shall be with the wild animals. You shall be made to eat grass like oxen, you shall be bathed with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, until you have learned that the Most High has sovereignty over the kingdom of mortals, and gives it to whom he will. As it was commanded to leave the stump and roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be re-established for you from the time that you learn that Heaven is sovereign.

So John takes his cue from Old Testament writers in not making these terms a frequent feature of his vision of God’s sovereignty.

In the New Testament, God’s sovereignty comes indirectly through the preaching and teaching of the coming of the Kingdom of God. But, for want of a better way of putting it, even this becomes diluted in the early Church’s recognition of their role as extending Christ’s kingdom – a pattern that is still followed in the church today.

Just reading these words, feeds our minds and our faith in God’s power. I don’t mean to be irreverent here, but do they do the same for our imaginations? If they don’t, then we really need a book like Revelation for John’s visions of the sovereignty of God gives truth to the saying that “a picture can paint a thousand words.” It is his throne-room vision that points us to the transcendent nature of God’s sovereignty. Scholars have estimated that, either explicitly or implicitly, the image of God’s throne is mentioned 42 times in Revelation and that in the Bible, almost 60% of the occurrences of the word ‘throne’ refer to God’s

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throne. One scholar (DBT p868) has written “The image of a throne is one of the most glorious and evocative in the entire Bible. It denotes authority, power, majesty and splendour.” We don’t have the time to mention all the references individually, but we can see how John in his throne room visions in chapters 4, 5 and 7 picks up previous images of God’s throne and brings them together in an amazing word picture that can allow the mind and imagination to combine to give an even greater appreciation of God’s sovereign power.

First of all he confirms the belief that God’s throne is in the heavens.

4.1-2

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven....and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

This can be compared to:

Job 26:9

He encloses the face of his throne, And spreads his cloud upon it.

Psalm 103:19

Jehovah hath established his throne in the heavens; And his kingdom rules over all.

Isaiah 6:1-4

In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.

Jeremiah 17:12

A glorious throne, set on high from the beginning, is the place of our sanctuary.

Daniel 7:9

I beheld till thrones were placed, and one that was ancient of days did sit: his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and the wheels thereof burning fire.

Just this one picture of a throne situated in an other-worldly, heavenly realm gives us the impression of a sovereign Being with not just the world, but the whole universe at His command. It gives credence to God’s words to Isaiah that no human being could provide the kind of domain that God has created for Himself.

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Isaiah 66:1

Thus says the LORD: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me? and what is my resting place?

In a completely different context, but nevertheless conveying the same sentiment Matthew 5:34-35

But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.

John then tells us who and what were present in the throne room. There are various references throughout Revelation to both terrestrial and extra-terrestrial entities. Those mentioned are the seven spirits/angels, twenty-four elders, four living creature, the Lamb, myriads of angels, great multitudes from all the tribes of the earth, innumerable people in white robes, the male child brought forth by a woman, the 144,000 and all the dead, both great and small. The verses that perhaps sum it up for us are 7:9 and 19:1 where we are told of

“A GREAT MULTITUDE that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.”

Thanks, praise, worship, falling prostrate and confessions and acclamations come from those before the throne of God. This reinforces the portrayal of God as the most majestic, commanding and powerful Being among all who are mentioned. Time does not allow me to go into each of these references, but just two examples illustrate the extent of God’s sovereign power. There is a consensus that the image of the 24 elders represent the 12 tribes of Israel and the 12 apostles. In other words, God’s sovereignty extends over both His Old and New Testament saints. Revelation 7:9 becomes the counterpart of Ezekiel 28:23

So I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the LORD.

Throughout Old Testament prophecy and the New Testament outreach to the world at large, God is shown to be in control of the destiny of nations. The verse also takes us to the fulfilment of the prophecy **in Isaiah 52:10**

The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

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While the nations convey the idea of God’s sovereignty over human history in general, the presence of angels and the images of the four living creatures make His sovereignty more specific, extending it into the realm of His supernatural and natural creation. Angels play a major role in carrying out all the directives from the throne and Isaiah 6:12 describes the worshipping angels as

“... the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.”

“Holy, holy holy...” is also the song of the four living creatures in 4:6-7, the images of which are directly taken from Ezekiel 1:10-14.

As for the appearance of their faces: the four had the face of a human being, the face of a lion on the right side, the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle; such were their faces. Their wings were spread out above; each creature had two wings, each of which touched the wing of another, while two covered their bodies.

In the centre, around the throne were four living creatures and they were covered with eyes in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was a flying eagle.

Again there is consensus that the faces of these creatures are symbolic of the lion being king of the wild beasts, the ox which had primacy over domesticated animals in the ancient world, the eagle, monarch of bird life, and man, the crown of God’s creation. Their homage not only acknowledges the divine holiness of throne but also indicates the sovereignty of God over all these realms.

Then John draws attention to the appearance of the throne, drawing together the images of the One who sat on the throne and the throne itself in 4:4.

And the One who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow resembling an emerald encircled the throne.

This can be compared to Ezekiel 1:26

And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man upon it above.

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We can also compare verse 5 with Exodus 19:16, natural phenomena depicting the presence and action of God.

From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder.

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning with thick cloud over the mountain.

In all of these ways John is showing His audience and us, that the almighty God still reigns and the magnificence and glory of His sovereignty stretches human language and imagination to its limits. John reinforces his prophetic forefathers' concepts of a sovereign Lord, who exists enthroned in heavenly realms exercising universal control over both His terrestrial and extra-terrestrial creation. And the reason that His sovereignty is unassailable is because His throne is eternal.

Lamentations 15:19

You O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation.

This is affirmed in Revelation 4:9-10

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever;....

Further reinforcement comes in Revelation 1:8 and in repetitions in the Book. **“I am the Alpha and Omega”, says the Lord God, “who is, and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”**

The four living creatures in 4:8 **“who never stop saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is and is to come.”**

And that is still God's status in the last two chapters in 21:6 and 22:13 **Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.**

22:13

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

In this too John does not depart from beliefs which were held by the faithful Old Testament people of God.

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Isaiah 41:4

Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD, am first, and will be with the last.

48:12

Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel, whom I called: I am He; I am the first, and I am the last.

The description of God as the eternal One “who is, and who was and who is to come” has tremendous significance for how we interpret the coming of the fifth and final Day of the Lord. Revelation faces us with the fact that God is working to a different timescale to us. Humanity’s idea of time is finite: God’s is not. From the human standpoint of time, God gave humanity the basic measure of time and then the intelligence and skill to measure it more accurately.

Genesis 1:5

God called the light day and the darkness he called night. And there was evening and there was morning – the first day.

When life was simple, day and night, the phases of the moon and the seasons all marked time at a leisurely pace. Then along came sundials and hour glasses which measured time by hour. Then in the 1200s along came clocks that started us on the way to measuring time by the minute, until nowadays, we not progressed to having seconds, we even have nanoseconds. From entertainment, to transport to speech, time is an inescapable part of all our lives. We speak of periods of time in terms of past, present and future. But, in a way that our finite minds cannot grasp because it defies all physical laws, is that the One “who was, and is and is to come” holds at one and the same time the past, the present and the future. The beginning and the end are one, when time is viewed through the lens of eternity. We find confirmation of this in Revelation 13:8 and 17:8 where an end-time element was decided from the foundation of the world.

13:8

and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

17:8

And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world.....

And that is why any attempt to estimate or predict the time of the fifth Day of the Lord is an exercise in futility because the visions God gave to John are a combination of the world’s past, present and future. The designation of God as

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the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, “who was, and is, and is to come” convey a sovereignty over all human calculations of time. I’ve mentioned how Isaiah too saw God as the first and the last and the Old Testament gives us examples of that sovereignty in human existence.

God determines the earthly course of time and how long each one of us will spend on it.

Psalm 90:10 The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;.....

Psalm 31:15 My times are in your hand;.....

Ecclesiastes 3:1 For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

All of this points to the fact that God is not bound by time. As the Creator of time and the One who determines what happens in the system of time He has created for humanity, He stands outside of what He has created. In the face of these Biblical assertions, it then is the height of arrogance to propose a human timescale and sequence for the coming of the climax of prophecy.

So, the throne thus becomes Revelation’s major symbol for conveying God’s royal power and authority over every realm of creation, including the time of its existence – a matter determined from before its very foundation. Whatever way the images in the throne room scenes in Revelation are interpreted, the overriding picture is that of the transcendent majesty and magnificence of the sovereign power held by the eternal Alpha and Omega.

Revelation 4:3

And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow resembling an emerald encircled the throne.

Isaiah 57:15

For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place.

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WEEK 3: SOVEREIGN LAMB

As a result of the discussion we had after last Wednesday’s talk, I thought it might be helpful to spend a few more minutes explaining why God gave John these visions at this particular time. The simple answer is that the church was coming under increasing pressure from developments in the Roman Empire under the emperor Domitian. There was no policy of actual physical persecution of Christians at this time. To the Romans they were just a Jewish sect. But under Domitian the Jews were targeted for tax raising purposes and, hence, Christians too came under scrutiny. Also, in contravention of Roman citizen practice, Domitian was demanding worship as a god. John saw the very real potential for widespread persecution in all forms – he, himself was in exile on Patmos at the time - and that is why the Church needed the reassurance that, regardless of what was happening, God’s power could deal with it. Revelation has been described as one of the most politically subversive writings of ancient times, because John sees the way the wind is blowing and, that the threat will come from Rome - hence the need to couch his visions in a coded way. To do it any other way would have put Christians everywhere in the Empire in even greater danger.

And bearing in mind that these visions came up to 60 years after Christ’s ascension, Christians may have lost sight of who and what He was and wondered if it was worth persevering in their faith. They needed to see not the Christ of the Gospels, but the heavenly, exalted Christ, and that is where John starts. Jesus on earth had set aside attributes of His divinity. John first vision is of that divinity fully restored. The Head of the Church was alive and would ensure the Church’s ultimate victory.

We know that John is referring to Jesus for he is the only writer in the New Testament who uses the Son of Man title of Christ in any post-ascension context. Son of Man is the title Jesus gave Himself, so by introducing the divine figure as the Son of Man in the first chapter, John is therefore leaving us in no doubt that he is referring to the exalted Christ and is repeated elsewhere in the book.

John 1:13-16

and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

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These images are taken directly from Daniel’s vision in 10:5-6 of a glorious heavenly Being, which to Daniel would have been God.

10:5-6

I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen, with a belt of gold from Uphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude.

It’s stating the obvious, but under no circumstances could these descriptions be applied to a mere human being. John would have been very well aware that to describe Jesus as such was a recognition of His divine status. The main point of describing the clothing is to indicate a Person of exceptional status for these were normally worn by priests and kings, with the golden sash being the emblem of a king. A more direct reference to divinity is the appearance of His face for it echoes Jesus’ appearance on the mount of transfiguration.

Matthew 17:2

He was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.

Just this one point could take us into a complete study of the Scriptural significance of God being light and Jesus being the light of the world, together with references to white robes. But it is a prime example of how Revelation is so dependent on the rest of Biblical revelation about God, Christ and the world.

Eyes like fire suggests spiritual insight which Isaiah 11:2 foretold as

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

The fiery nature of the eyes however, also point to a role in judgement for fire in Scripture is associated with that act.

The white hair would be associated with age and again the source in Daniel 7:9

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool;

There could be no clearer indication that Jesus is so closely connected to God that the two become indistinguishable. It adds new meaning to Paul’s words in **Colossians 2:9**

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.

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It also affirms the incident which John recorded in his gospel in 14:9-10 Jesus makes it clear in answer to Philip’s request to be shown the Father.

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

Feet of burnished bronze is a compromise translation and having been fired in a furnace suggests the moral purity of the exalted Son of Man.

Isaiah 48:10-11

See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity. For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for why should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

No one suffered more in the furnace of adversity than Jesus when He was crucified as an innocent, sinless human being, who had fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law of God. God could not and would not give His glory to anyone else. But this first chapter clearly shows it was given to Christ. Also, given that a name in ancient times signified a person’s whole character, for God to give His Name to anyone who did not have His character, would profane it. So, we can also point here to Paul’s words in **Philippians 2**

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the NAME that is above every NAME, so that at the NAME of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The strength of the voice and the sharp two edged sword proceeding from the mouth of the Son of Man also evokes so many Scriptural references to the voice of God, Jeremiah 51:16 giving us a direct reference to it sounding like “many waters.”

Jeremiah 51:16

When he utters his voice there is a tumult of waters in the heavens, and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth.....

Isaiah 49:2 leads us to the very familiar text in Hebrews 4:12

He made my mouth like a sharpened sword in the shadow of his hand he hid me;

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Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

So, when each individual feature is looked at through the lens of Scripture, the description in John’s vision of the Son of Man conveys to us His undeniable divinity. The summary of what has been mentioned shows the transcendent appearance of the Risen Christ in wisdom, moral uprightness and penetrating discernment that makes Him capable of judging the people of God- a prerogative of God alone.

However, what God revealed in these visions take us beyond the assurance of Jesus being restored to His pre-existent glory. The vision of the exalted Christ would be enough to give us confidence and hope in all He promised. John is shown the extent of the success of Jesus’ earthly ministry for He returned to heaven with achievement of world salvation completed and the work as Lord of the Church inaugurated. The achievement of salvation is brought to life in Revelation by the use of the image of the slain lamb. This is an image that takes us right into the heart of salvation history.

Picture for a moment the throne room scene as it unfolds. We see John watching the proceedings and becoming very upset because, God has made available a scroll bearing seven seals. He is willing to reveal its contents but no one in heaven or on earth was even worthy enough to look inside it, never mind break the seals to reveal the writings to everyone else. Then John is told not to despair, there is One that God will permit to break the seals and open the scroll.

John is told this Person is the Lion of Judah and the Root of David. We have already seen how Jesus was the fulfilment of the Davidic covenant by lineage and by right of kingship through the covenant God made with David. So, like John we anticipate the arrival of Christ. Lion of Judah is another pointer because Jesus came from the tribe of Judah and the lion is a symbol of triumphant conquest. The image of the Lion of Judah takes us back to Genesis 49:9

Judah is a lion’s whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up.

It is an image which can be associated with Christ’s future role as the divine conqueror, so these two images invite us to imagine the appearance of a kingly conqueror. But much to John’s surprise, instead of seeing the strongest animal, he sees the weakest – a lamb; and one looking as though it had been slain. How do we reconcile the two? How can Jesus, at one and the same time be a lion and a lamb? For me, the most acceptable scholarly suggestion is worthiness before the throne of God comes not from might and power, but from

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obedient self-sacrifice. There is no doubt that going to the cross would take lion like strength and courage, but Easter was predominantly about obedience. Jesus carried out the will of God on earth and was prepared to suffer the humiliation of the cross. That is now behind Him and what is now being revealed is Jesus’ restoration to full equality of sovereignty with the Father.

Admittedly, describing divine sovereignty using the image of a slain lamb seems incongruous to us, but God has revealed through John’s visions, the heavenly perspective of Christ’s earthly achievement. The image of the Lamb is used 28 times in Revelation alone, but permeates the whole of Scripture. The references consistently point to a direct connection between God and a lamb in the matter of salvation. It is first mentioned in Genesis 22:8 when Abraham, taking his son to be sacrificed, told Isaac

Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

The substitutionary nature of God’s provision which saved Isaac’s life is inescapable. It was also the means of saving lives in Exodus 12:3

Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.

There we are reminded that the blood of a Lamb saved the Israelites from the fate of the Egyptians, when the first-born, both human and animal died as a result of Pharaoh’s refusal to let the people go. That is a ceremony remembered and celebrated in Judaism to the present day.

The Passover eventually led to lambs becoming the sacrificial victims under Mosaic law for the atonement of a variety of offences. Lambs are specifically mentioned in connection with sacrifices more than eighty times in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers.

Numbers 28:4

⁴One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight;

But by New Testament times, Christians saw this tradition through cross. Paul exhortations to the Corinthians to be better behaved towards each other includes the reason in 5:7

.....For Christ, our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.....

And, when we come to the prophets, we cannot omit to mention Isaiah 53:7,

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He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

This Scripture was accepted by the early church as a messianic prophecy pointing to the death of Christ. Evidence for this comes from Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip’s explanation of the text relating it to Jesus’ death led to conversion and baptism. So, even in these early days, the sacrificial lamb image had become embedded in the preaching and teaching of the early church as referring to Christ.

And it was only John who realised the significance of John the Baptist’s words, when he included in his gospel, what John had told his disciples in 1:29
Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Peter, too, adds his voice in 1:18-19

You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish.

So, when we come to Revelation, we see that the image of the Lamb has a long and prestigious pedigree. The throne room vision brings us to the point where the Lamb is no longer the sacrificial victim, but the exalted Lord because He was willing to become that victim. The act that confirms Him as the Lamb of God is His worthiness to open the scroll **“held in the right hand of him who sat on the throne.”** (Revelation 5:1). This is significant, because in ancient times, a sealed message signified ownership and authenticity. Clearly, until the redemptive work on the cross had been completed, God was not prepared to entrust the knowledge of the end-times to anyone else. This is borne out by the fact that **“...no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.”** John probably was aware of the reference in Daniel 12:4 where Daniel was told to seal up the book God had shown him. **But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end.-**

Revelation 5:1-61 by contrast shows God offering to reveal the contents of a scroll if there is someone worthy enough to entrust them to. In fact, in 22:10, John is specifically told: **“Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.”** That command was given because the Lamb was found worthy to open the scroll which revealed the eschatological visions of both redemption and judgement that would prevail until the end times, when the fifth Day of the Lord would inaugurate a new era.

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The reason why the Lamb is regarded as worthy is given in 5:9

“And they sang a new song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation’” (5:9).

The reference here to the cross is obvious. The redemptive nature of the crucifixion enabled God to gather together a people acceptable because He could justify them on the basis of the shed blood of His Christ. By proving His worthiness through death on the cross, Jesus’ ability to break the seals put the final stage of God’s sovereign purpose and plan into effect. It was the stage in which Jesus’ role is decisive regarding the eternal destiny of believers and unbelievers alike.

John gives us evidence for this statement, firstly by giving us two further characteristics of the Lamb. Scholars agree that the Lamb’s seven horns denote divine power.

Psalm 89:17

My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn shall be exalted.

The meaning of the seven eyes which are God’s ‘seven spirits’ is less clear. The general consensus is that the seven spirits represent God’s Holy Spirit and we know that the presence of the Holy Spirit was with Jesus from conception. This further affirmation of the presence of the Spirit in the Lamb, suggests that God is gathering His information about the state of the earth through the eyes of the Lamb, and responses to the Lamb will determine how He judges the people of the world. **Psalm 11:4**

The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD’S throne is in heaven. His eyes behold, his gaze examines humankind.

The second way in which John emphasises the centrality of the role of the Lamb and His exalted status is through the worship that is then offered to Him. This is what confirms the deity of Jesus beyond all doubt. The first commandment makes it clear that worship is to be given to God alone. To deny the deity of Jesus infers that the angels and saints in heaven and all believers down through the ages to us sitting in this room, who echo their voices are in breach of the first commandment. Psalm 29:2 sums up the Biblical teaching that worship is to be given to God alone.

Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendour.

The heavenly songs worship Jesus with the same with the same fervency and ascribed with the same tributes that are given to God throughout Scripture. In chapter 5, an innumerable chorus of angels – **“thousands upon thousands, and**

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ten thousand times ten thousand” - and the living creatures and the elders, in a loud voice sing:

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

These are joined by every creature in heaven and earth and under the earth and on the sea echoing the praise.

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever.

The worship relating to the redemption achieved by the Lamb continues 7 verses 9 and 14, where John gives us a picture of the redeemed.

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.”

By chapter 12, there is further celebration because as well as the redemption of sinners, the cross effected the defeat of Satan, the accuser of the brethren who was permanently excluded from God’s domain.

“Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony.”

The worship of both God and the Lamb confirms not just the deity of Jesus but puts Him at the very centre of God’s ultimate goal for humanity. The crucifixion made Jesus worthy to open the scroll which revealed God’s words regarding how this world will move towards that end. In that respect too, it was the obedience of the slain Lamb that made certain the fulfilment of those words as the world moves towards the climax of prophecy.

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WEEK 4: SOVEREIGN LORD

Revelation is first and foremost, a message from God to the church. Last week I said that Jesus went back to heaven as Saviour of the world and Lord of the church. That is why we sing

The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation
By water and the Word.
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her
And for her life He died.

But the Church was under increasing pressure, with the main threat coming from the leader of the greatest empire the world has known. Revelation 13:3-4 sums it up.

....The whole world was astonished and followed the beast. Men worshipped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshipped the beast and asked, Who is like the beast? Who can make war against him?

The dragon represents Satan and the beast the empire and/or emperor. John thus spells out the evil nature of the empire. But his answer in the face of this powerful combination is to be found in this familiar hymn taken from Psalm 72

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no
more.*

Psalm 72:5 & 8

He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. (5)

He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth (8)

In the messages to the 7 churches, John is showing that the exalted Christ is far, far greater and much more powerful than the 'beast.' Christ is directing the Church and knows exactly its situation at any given time.

What emerges from John's messages to the churches and these words from a completely different context, is the concept of royal, worldwide and eternal sovereignty. Logically too, these words indicate that Christ is already reigning on earth, His kingly sovereignty being manifested in and exercised through the

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Church. The kingdom is being established on earth with citizens who have entered into it through “the new covenant in His blood” for God intends to build his kingdom through Jesus Christ and in no other way. As Jesus, Himself, said: “No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6).

Sovereign Lordship of the church is being exercised here and now in the church. Chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation provide us with a window into the life of the church in Asia at the end of the first century. But when you examine the conditions of the churches mentioned there you start to see the accuracy of the words

Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed:
Yet saints their watch are keeping,
Their cry goes up, “How long?”
And soon the night of weeping
Shall be the morn of song!

Scholars have said that the members of the churches belonged to a minority religion amongst hostile pagan religions as well as hostile Jews. Back in May, David mentioned that this was the situation of the church in our own day. Boring says that “The churches were plagued by external conflicts and internal tensions.” This commentator goes on to state that we do not get an idealised picture, but a mixture of faith and doubt, responsibility and irresponsibility which has always characterised the church in this world. We’ve all got to admit that if we looked around what constitutes the Christian church in this world, nothing much has changed. External physical oppression and violence and secular pressures add to unbiblical liberalism, schisms and heresies within the Christian communities. Looking at the circumstances of the church today, almost makes us despair about its very survival. We can identify with the words in the hymn “How long” - how long will God let this go on? But it is an especially poignant question, for the ones who are asking the question in Revelation 6:10 are those who have been killed for their faith.

they cried out with a loud voice, “Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?”

Yet the hymn says that the ‘night’ of weeping’ will turn to the ‘morn of song.’ There is only one explanation for reversal of circumstances. The sovereign Lordship of Christ over the church. Look at His credentials in 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14

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Last week I left out the reference to the seven stars held in the Son of Man’s hands. At the end of chapter 1 we are told that the stars are the angels of the 7 churches. Scholars dispute the meaning of the image, but agree that its source is Daniel 12:3.

Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

Stars therefore symbolise those who have been resurrected to heavenly glory. This is true of all believers in our already-but-not-yet situation, for in Ephesians 2:4-7 Paul tells us:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ by grace you have been saved AND RAISED US UP WITH HIM AND SEATED US WITH HIM IN THE HEAVENLY PLACES IN CHRIST JESUS, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

There is consensus that ‘hand’ symbolises sovereignty. This reference therefore takes us to a picture of Christ as the priestly ruler not only of the church on earth, but also of its counterpart in heaven. And 2:1 tells us that He walks among the lampstands which are a collective image for the church. This one reference emphasises that Christ is the head of the church – a point often emphasised by Paul. The rest of the descriptions of the One who walks among the lampstands build up and correspond with other images of the Son of Man in chapter 1. Hence, the credentials of Jesus’ divine, sovereign lordship over the churches are indisputable, according to these symbols. Last week, we looked at the meanings of some of these images, but coming in the context of Christ’s lordship over the church, just a few more words are needed.

The first and the last, who died and came to life again, the Son of God (which is the only use of this term in Revelation) and the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation, all identify Jesus as an eternal being, who has tasted death and yet is alive forever more having conquered death.

The burnished bronze feet and sword, signify the moral purity of the Word of God. The fiery eyes belong to the One who speaks these words and with piercing scrutiny, discerns exactly what is going on in each community. Hence He is able to make the kinds of judgements that make His censorship and/or praise and advice accurate and relevant in each case. He can do this because He is holy, faithful and true to God. The images which convey this are His holding the keys of David. Jesus was the Davidic Messiah and keys signify His control

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in the matter of the churches. Mention of being the Son of God indicates a closeness between Father and Son in activity and function. This is emphasised by His possession of the seven spirits. Scholars agree that these signify God active in the world and substantially the term is no different from the Holy Spirit. The ‘AMEN’ is a word meaning absolute truth, reality and fact.

Taken together, they build up a powerful picture of the Lord of the churches, who is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. If our modern church has lost this vision of its ultimate head, then John’s vision of the authority of the exalted Christ and His absolute control over the His church brings it back to our remembrance. It also gives force to the ‘I know...’ in verses 2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15

Because of His omniscience, Jesus knows about hard work, perseverance and hardship experienced by the Church in Ephesus and how they have tried to combat heresy. (2:2-3) He knows the afflictions and poverty of the church in Symrna and the pernicious inroads made by the Judaisers. He also knows that they will suffer persecution. He knows Pergamum is situated in a godless environment and that Thyatira tolerates idolatry and immorality. He knows that Sardis is already a dead church spiritually and that Laodicea is neither hot nor cold – in other words – anything goes. Only Symrna and Philadelphia come out of this scrutiny without blame because they remain true to Him. Ephesus too is strong in the faith, so how could they have fallen from their first love. It is suggested that ritual, and church traditions could have become more important to them than the simple Gospel. It may illustrate Oswald Chambers statement that “the good is the enemy of the best.”

Jesus’ appeals to the churches to repent of and amend their ways where necessary are appeals which would lead to spiritual blessing if they obeyed Jesus’ warnings. “He who has an ear to hear” but refuses to heed “what the Spirit says to the churches” will reap the consequences mentioned in each case.

But for those who trust and persevere through all the trials and tribulations that they will face, there is an eternal fulfilment in store. These glimpses of fulfilment emphasise the lordship of Christ and mention promised rewards in the New city which will be established when all the earthly matters have been dealt with in this age in which we live. And, because it is promised by the sovereign Lord all predictions are certain to be fulfilled. We don’t have time to go into each one individually, but this list gives you the correlation between chapters 2 and 3 and promised rewards in other references in the book.

Eat from the Tree of life	2:7	=	22:2, 14
A new name	2:17	=	19:12
White garment	3:5	=	6:11

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Book of Life	3:5	=	13:8 & 21:27
A pillar in the Temple in the New Jerusalem	3:12	=	21:2
Sharing Christ’s throne	3:21	=	20:4

So, if these messages are indeed universal in scope applying to the church at any given point in time, the ultimate victory of the believer who perseveres through the trials of life is assured and the ‘overcomer’ is given a glimpse into the glorious eternal rewards of the faithful.

But this is not Jesus’ final words to the churches. “To him who overcomes” points to the note of victory which permeates the whole of Revelation and indeed, the whole of Scripture. But in terms of the sovereignty of Christ over the church, this has especial significance. The reason for this is the reason Christ Himself gave while on earth

Matthew 16:18

..... I will **build** my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

How will Jesus fulfil this prediction? The first indication is in Revelation 7:3

Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God.

This command was given by an angel, bearing God’s seal. 144,000 thousand received that seal of protection and throughout Revelation, this number symbolises the completed number in Christ’s kingdom on earth. Paul tells us this in plain language in Ephesians 1:13-14

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, **YOU WERE MARKED IN HIM WITH A SEAL, THE PROMISED HOLY SPIRIT, WHO IS A DEPOSIT GUARANTEEING OUR INHERITANCE UNTIL THE REDEMPTION OF THOSE WHO ARE GOD’S POSSESSION – TO THE PRAISE OF HIS GLORY.**

It is Christ who will lead the church to final victory when the fifth Day of the Lord comes. In this, we will also find Revelation true to what has gone before.

Jeremiah 4:13

13 Look! He COMES UP LIKE CLOUDS, his chariots like the whirlwind; his horses are swifter than eagles.....

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Daniel 7:13-14

As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being COMING WITH THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. TO HIM WAS GIVEN DOMINION AND GLORY AND KINGSHIP, THAT ALL PEOPLES, NATIONS, AND LANGUAGES SHOULD SERVE HIM. HIS DOMINION IS AN EVERLASTING DOMINION THAT SHALL NOT PASS AWAY, AND HIS KINGSHIP IS ONE THAT SHALL NEVER BE DESTROYED.

Matthew 24:30-31

Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, 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.

Acts 1:9-11

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and A CLOUD hid him from their sight.....Men of Galilee,...why do you stand here looking into the sky? THIS SAME JESUS, WHO HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM YOU INTO HEAVEN WILL COME BACK IN THE SAME WAY YOU HAVE SEEN HIM GO INTO HEAVEN

REVELATION 1:7

LOOK! HE IS COMING WITH THE CLOUDS; EYE WILL SEE HIM, EVEN THOSE WHO PIERCED HIM; AND ON HIS ACCOUNT ALL THE TRIBES OF THE EARTH WILL WAIL.

There will be wailing because of the image in chapter 14.

Then I looked and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads. But the Lamb is - “one like a son of man with a gold crown on his head” sitting on a white cloud with a “sharp sickle in his hand.”

This is the image of the conquering Lord leading His church to victory over the world. Intervening chapters tell of the end-time battles against evil, but in 19:12-21 we come to the image of the Victor. His name is ‘Faithful and True’ the description of the witness in 3:14. Horses in the Bible are associated with war and Roman emperors rode a white horse when they celebrated a military victory in a public procession. Again the images of His divine status reappear

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– many crowns, eyes like blazing fire, and a sharp sword proceeding from His mouth. Significantly in verse 16 we find

On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. The emperor might claim these titles, but Jesus embodies them.

And verse 21 gives the fate of the opposition forces.

The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse.....

There are many interpretations of these images. Verse 21` would suggest that an actual, physical battle is not envisaged for the killing would be the result of condemnation by the Word of God – the sword being seen in other references as that. However, the one thing that stands out is that the victory belongs to the rider on the white horse, who, by the descriptions given to Him, is a sovereign Lord.

One final image then conveys the complete and final victory for the Church. The marriage feast of the Lamb.

Revelation 19:7-9

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; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

The church as the bride of Christ is a New Testament concept but has its theological roots in the Old Testament. Marriage has largely become irrelevant, but it was the very first human bond. Throughout the Scriptures we see the importance of marriage in the development salvation history - Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Ruth and Boaz, Solomon and his Shulammitte bride, Esther and the king, Mary and Joseph. Figuratively also, as we saw primarily from Hosea, but also in other Old Testament writings that marriage was the primary metaphor for God’s relationship with His people and their unfaithfulness to Him was couched in terms of adultery.

Jeremiah 2:1

I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown.

Jeremiah 3:20.

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Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the LORD.

Whatever the specific motif, the foundation on which all additional images of marriage are placed is the basic principle that in marriage two become one.

Genesis 2:24

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

Jesus own words reaffirmed this. In Matthew 19:5 He quotes Genesis, ending with the words used in today’s marriage ceremonies in verse 6

So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.

Paul gives us the same teaching in his metaphor of the church being joined together in one body with Christ as its head, for example - Colossians 1:18

He is the head of the body, the church;.....

More specifically, writing in the context of husbands and wives, in Ephesians 5:30-32, the two concepts of church and marriage are explicitly brought together.

...because we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church.

The hymn expresses John’s message then and addresses our situation now.

*Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace forevermore
Till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest*

And Jesus’ prayer in John 17:22-24 is the basis for this belief.

The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be **one**, as we are **one**; I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. FATHER, I DESIRE THAT THOSE ALSO, WHOM YOU HAVE GIVEN ME, MAY BE WITH ME WHERE I AM, TO SEE MY GLORY, WHICH YOU HAVE GIVEN ME BECAUSE YOU LOVED ME BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD.

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All this culminates in the vision in Revelation 19:6-8 at the coming of the fifth Day of the Lord.

Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.

Until that time, the doxology in **Jude 24-25**, assures us that as sovereign Lord of the Church, this is what awaits everyone whose name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand *without blemish* in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

WEEK 5: SOVEREIGN CONTROL

So far we have seen that there is a sovereign purpose to our existence and that sovereign power ensures that it will be fulfilled. Also that the means to do so

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was achieved in the past by the sovereign, slain Lamb, who is presently the sovereign Lord of the church, which He is leading to victory in spite of all appearances to the contrary. Unfortunately, this week we have to come back down to earth – and it’s not a happy picture. Our discussions and David’s sermons and prayers over past weeks have drawn attention to the terrible state of our world. And Revelation gives us some horrific visions of what is going on in the world of that time too.

The problem is that these things fall within God’s permissive will – and that is extremely difficult for many Christians and others to accept or understand. You can imagine John’s audience believing the power of the deity of God and Christ, but like us, saying “ Yes, but if that is the case, why is our church and the world in the state it’s in; and when is He coming to do something about it? Why didn’t God prevent this or that happening? Why does God allow the bad people to come out on top? Why doesn’t God intervene and solve all the problems of the world now? I know these are questions I’ve asked myself and I keep coming back to the fact of life that Garden of Eden disobedience has led to all that plunges our world into the evils that we see around us. As David said in the sermon a couple of weeks ago – when people turn their backs on God, these are the consequences. The bad news is that that is not going to change until the end of time. The good news is the reassuring fact that whatever the state of the world at any given moment in time, God knows exactly what is going on. The smallest detail does not escape Him: He knows when a sparrow falls. And according to His sovereign will, all in the past, present and future of this planet will be appropriately dealt with. But it will be dealt with in His time, not ours. God’s control will ensure everything that is in our world is moving towards, and contributing to, the completion and consummation of His sovereign purpose.

And talking about time. As I mentioned in the very first week, John’s visions in Revelation don’t work to our time systems. Look at these examples. The first one is very reassuring. Don’t worry about the world ending today, it’s already tomorrow in Australia (Charles Schultz). The second one shows that at one and the same time we are living in New York’s future, our present and Tokyo’s past. Fortunately, we don’t get too confused over that because we work on a 24 hour day timescale. But, put past, present and future together into an eternal, measureless timeframe and it’s no wonder Revelation causes so many problems for people who try to interpret it using human concepts of time. Human theories are made possible by the fact that the visions themselves occur randomly in the book. But an overview shows that God is working ‘behind the scenes’ as it were, and is controlling everything we are seeing in the world. So, how does John see his world? Firstly, we can look at man-made evils. In chapter 6 the so-called four horses of the apocalypse appear. The first two symbolise military, conquest leading to war. Both of these situations happen

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because of human evil and lust for power. God allows this to happen but His control is shown in 6:4

Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider WAS GIVEN power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other. To him WAS GIVEN a large sword.

The verb ‘was given’ indicates that while God may allow these things to take their course, their duration and outcome are in His hands. What He has ‘given’ or allowed can also be taken away again.

Job 1:20

....The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away.....

Famine, plague and death are symbolised by the black and pale horses. Throughout time, these have often been the result of war and the refugee situation. Again, however, in verse 8, death only has power given. Death and Hades

....WERE GIVEN power over a fourth of the earth to kill by the sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.

Situations which arise from these human actions seem to contradict the overwhelming Scriptural theme that God is love. But just as God gave the Israelites time to repent of their ways, so God is still giving humanity the same opportunities. But as early as Genesis 6:3, God had already determined the limits to which He is prepared to let humanity go.

And the LORD said, my spirit shall not always strive with man.....

This came in the context of the wickedness that had increased on the earth and led to God regretting He had created it. The result was the Flood. When God reaches that point again, which will be when all the people He knows will accept Him have had the opportunity to do so, there will be a new heaven and earth. But this time it will be an eternal one.

Mention of the Flood, then takes us to the natural disasters that come from the visions of the seals, trumpets and bowls. We do not have the time to mention all of the phenomena but whatever is mentioned can be traced back into the Old Testament in instances of some of the plagues of Egypt and in those of the ‘Day of the Lord’ references in the writing prophets. In each and every case, the phenomena come in the context of judgement on the various forms of rebellion against God and blatant disregard for His laws.

Revelation 6:12-13

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I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat’s hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth....The sky receded like a scroll rolling up and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Joel 2:30-31

I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes.

Locusts were the 8th plague sent on Egypt and are still a scourge today. The imagery of **Revelation 9:7-9** is a measure of their destructive power.

In appearance the locusts were like horses equipped for battle. On their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, their hair like women’s hair, and their teeth like lions’ teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.

Amos 7:1 tells us that the “Sovereign Lord” showed him that “**He was preparing swarms of locusts.**” And Joel chapters 1 and 2 describes the merciless terror and destruction they bring.

Joel 1 and 2

4 They have the appearance of horses; they gallop along like cavalry. With a noise like that of chariots they leap over the mountaintops, like a crackling fire consuming stubble, like a mighty army drawn up for battle.

Many more examples could be given, and the most striking one is that God’s judgement will come like a storm. **Isaiah 29:6** gives us a picture of this.

you will be visited by the LORD of hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.

After the 7th seal “there came peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (8:5). After the seventh trumpet, he records, “And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm” (11:19). The same thing is also said after the seventh bowl is poured out, only this time the earthquake is “severe” (16:18).

There is now virtually unanimous agreement that all these images are indications of God’s judgement on humanity because of its sinful nature and are three versions of this same judgement. Many people have seen these as epochs in history, one following on from the other. Modern scholars now see them as

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one vision, features of which have happened in the past, are happening now and will continue to happen in the future. The focus on climate change has highlighted extreme weather patterns. But, as yet, none of these phenomena have affected the whole world at the same time.

The one fact that can be admitted without reservation is that there will be an intensification of these occurrences as time goes on. Because these things are happening, for some, they have become indicators that the end of the world is imminent. But, today, is it possible to see the intensification coming as a result of the damage being done to our planet and the increasing rejection of God by billions more people on earth.

However, the fact that God’s judgement is depicted in images of the severity of naturally occurring phenomena is in itself an indication of God’s control.

Psalm 104

...You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.....

He created the natural world and therefore is the only One who can determine its manifestations. In that we have an example in the New Testament. The storm on the Sea of Galilee

Mark 4:????

...He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm..... AND THEY WERE FILLED WITH GREAT AWE AND SAID TO ONE ANOTHER, “WHO THEN IS THIS, THAT EVEN THE WIND AND THE SEA OBEY HIM?”

So we can see that from Genesis through to Revelation, severe deviations in nature have always been seen as under divine control and judgement. From that perspective, God has been judging what goes on in this world from the beginning of time. This being the case, it follows that He is in control of when those occurrences will signal the end of time, when final judgement will take place.

Until that happens, God’s control is continuing over all other aspects of life.

Chapter 13 takes us into the realm of government and religion. It depicts a political regime aggressively opposed to all that God stands for. For people of the time and modern scholars as well, the images depict Rome and Roman religion. That it is evil and godless is shown by the image of the dragon summoning the beast out of the sea. I think I mentioned that the sea was a symbol of all that was evil, dangerous and chaotic in the ancient world. The description of the beast symbolises his authority, power and ferocity. His power comes from the very source of evil itself.

13:2

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The beast’s crowns bear **“blasphemous names”** (1). Verse 2 tells us **The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority** – indicating the very source of the state is evil. Verses 5-7 states

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies...He opened his mouth to blaspheme God and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. He was given power to make war against the saints and to conquer them.

The image goes on to describe people all over the world worshipping the beast. And this was done through the establishment of a beast coming from the earth, which, by spurious means, compelled people to worship the first beast. I don’t know if you would agree, but doesn’t this describe some of the godless regimes that have existed throughout history and sound familiar when we mention fundamentalist Islam and North Korea, where the cult of leader is the country’s religion.

Is God in control when we see what these kinds of regimes are doing to Christians? As verse 10 shows, Christians have not been guaranteed physical protection and Jesus said His followers would be persecuted for His sake.

If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go. If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed.

But this power is finite. Psalm 59:8 sums up how God sees these nations.
But you laugh at them, O LORD; you hold all the nations in derision.

We saw throughout the writing prophets that God was the God of history. All nations come under His scrutiny.

Isaiah 14:26-27 sums up His control

This is the plan that is planned concerning the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?

Not even Satan who instigates all that is evil in the nations can escape that control because we are told in Revelation 12:12 that Satan’s crusade to cause as much damage as possible is because

...He is filled with fury because he knows that his time is short.

His time may not be short enough for us, but in God’s timescale, Satan’s end and the fate that awaits him has already come – and he knows it.

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And that fate also awaits those who follow him. Rome is depicted in chapter 13 and its fate in chapters 17 and 18. In chapter 17 John’s code name for Rome is Babylon, which we know from the Old Testament was the nemesis of the people of Judah.

The picture here is no different.

Revelation 17:6

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

Babylon had blood on its hands, but also was known for its opulent wealth and acquisition of the precious materials taken from conquered nations. Bearing in mind that Rome is acknowledged as the greatest and most powerful empire that has existed in history, we should not be surprised to find this kind of lavish, opulent lifestyle present among the emperors and their entourages. We find this in Revelation 18:12, where the wealth of the empire is all centred on Rome.

Cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.

These add up to the rarest and most expensive material possessions, together with the choicest products of the land and human slaves. This vision given to John is evidence that God knows how wealthy rulers and elites exploit others for their own gratification, especially for wealth and material possessions. But the social inequality and injustice that resulted from this was identified back in the Mosaic law and was very forthrightly condemned by the writing prophets. None of this is new, and again God’s control will one day be experienced by such people. The whole of chapter 18 depicts the destruction of the system of both the suppliers and the consumers that supported and encouraged this kind of greed. The merchants and the sea captains who carried the products to Rome will be ruined and Babylon which had seduced them by her appearance of power and invincibility will lie in ruins.

Revelation 16-17

....Woe! Woe!, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stone and pearls! IN ONE HOUR such great wealth has been brought to ruin.

“In one hour” is an image of how swiftly, power, wealth and possessions which may have taken many years to accumulate, can be swept away by God. And, just as the Babylon of old was eventually destroyed by the Medes and Persians,

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so too all the regimes that Babylon represents since the coming of Christ will also be destroyed. Chapter 18 is picture of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies against Babylon, which John has used to describe the future fate of the Rome of his own day, and the ultimate fate of every godless state that will exist until Christ comes.

Babylon was also one of the ancient 7 wonders of the world. According to prophecy it would be left in ruins – as it is today.

Isaiah 14:22-23

I will rise up against them, says the LORD of hosts, and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, offspring and posterity, says the LORD. And I will make it a possession of the hedgehog, and pools of water, and I will sweep it with the broom of destruction, says the LORD of hosts.

Jeremiah 50:13 & 39-40

Because of the wrath of the LORD she shall not be inhabited, but shall be an utter desolation; everyone who passes by Babylon shall be appalled and hiss because of all her wounds.....

Therefore wild animals shall live with hyenas in Babylon, and ostriches shall inhabit her; she shall never again be peopled, or inhabited for all generations. As when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah and their neighbours, says the LORD, so no one shall live there, nor shall anyone settle in her.

It brings into sharp relief Jesus' words in Luke 9:25

What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit their souls?

While Christians shouldn't gloat, because this is the fate of those who have persecuted God's people, (v24), rejoicing is permissible, because the fate has been according to God's timing and God's infallible sense of justice.

Revelation 18:20

Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.

Revelation 17:14

They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings – and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.

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J. Ramsey Michaels states (p17) that the book of Revelation is “transcendent and mysterious, yet anchored in history.” And God is the God who controls history. The four areas I have mentioned – man-made and natural disasters, godless political regimes and rampant materialism all find a place in the writings of both the Old and New Testaments and have featured in world history since those times. Over all these times and until Christ comes again, God is sovereign. As we have seen, He is in control of the past, the present and the future. Indeed, from God’s perspective, all that is recorded in Revelation is already an accomplished fact. So, from our perspective, what is more important is not a timeframe of events or speculation about the manner of their occurrence, but gaining from Revelation, backed by other Scriptures, the indisputable fact that God is in control of everything that is mentioned. Through omniscience He is aware of every single thing happening in this world. Through His omnipotence, He is able to control all areas of human and natural activity in this world. And through His omnipresence by the Holy Spirit, He can reassure Christ’s followers of the certainty of their eternal salvation and security of tenure in the place Christ has gone to prepare for them.

This world may get us down and cause us to despair of good ever triumphing over evil, but we can be sure that one day it will, because God’s control is absolute. That is what John was telling his people in Revelation. He is giving the same message to us today. The visions of Revelations never lose sight of the fact that God is on the throne. And that is celebrated in 19:6, a verse with echoes of Isaiah 52:7. John is the messenger God chose to bring that fact home to us.

Revelation 19:6-7

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder peals, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty REIGNS. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory!.....

Isaiah 52:7

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, “Your God REIGNS.”

WEEK 6: SOVEREIGN CLIMAX

As we saw last week, what is happening in our world gives us cause for despair. And Revelation implies it will even get worse as time goes on. That is why we need the visions of the heavenly throne and the almighty and comprehensive

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power and control of God and His Christ. That is the reality behind all we experience in the world. Those are visions we need to hold on to more and more to help us cope with life as it is, but also because of the promise that one day all wrongs will be righted. I think too that we have also come to the conclusion that no-one can predict when the end will be or how it will occur just by observation of global developments. Yet, Revelation invites us to think about the end times and, as a Christian, to look forward to them, the reason being that the climax of prophecy is not an end but a beginning, the beginning of a new era when God’s sovereign purpose will have been achieved, and Garden of Eden perfection will be restored, never again to be disrupted or destroyed by any form of evil. We need to hold on to the fact that this world is journeying towards the climactic moment when

Revelation 21:5

He who was seated on the throne said “Behold, I am making everything new.”

And speculation on the how and when of this new creation is futile, because none of us has the breadth and depth of the mind of God who planned this even before the world we know came into being. So, it seems that it is much more important to concentrate on the things we can be certain about when the climax of prophecy does come. And we can be certain of some of these things because they have already been revealed in the rest of Scripture.

What this talk concentrates on are non-negotiable aspects of our faith that form part of the end time events. That means that many of the images in the last four chapters of Revelation won’t be mentioned at all. Among those will be the 1000 year reign of Christ, simply because it does not meet the criteria of having other references to it in Scripture, and, as we saw in week 4, Christ is already reigning on earth through the church.

So what can we be certain about based on explicit Scriptural evidence? Firstly, faith takes Jesus at His word. He promised He would return for His church. According to calculations, this is mentioned over 300 times in the New Testament. Some of the examples were mentioned a couple of weeks ago, but two New Testament ones stand out because they use Old Testament prophetic imagery

In Luke 21:25-27

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.

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Peter was among the disciples who watched Jesus ascend into heaven and who heard the angel's message that He would return in the same way. Peter too looks to the Old Testament for His perception of Christ's return.

2 Peter 3:10

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

And John's words reaffirm all that has previously been said about Christ's coming again

Revelation 22:12-13

Behold I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.

Not only will Christ's Second Coming be much more visible than His first, He is coming to reward His faithful followers –those who have overcome, with all that was promised to the churches in chapters 2 and 3. But He also takes part in the final destruction of evil. We have mentioned in Revelation 19:11-16 the description of a Rider on a white horse which is the image of a victorious military leader, who leads His followers against the forces arrayed against Him.

So the second thing that faith accepts as certain fact is that the war between good and evil; between God and Satan, which started in the heavens before the earth was formed, and moved on to the earth in the Garden of Eden, will reach its climax in a final all out confrontation. This is where John models the battle on the Old Testament theme of Holy War, where God was regarded as a warrior who fought on behalf of His people.

Isaiah 42:13

The LORD goes forth like a SOLDIER, like a WARRIOR he stirs up his fury; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself MIGHTY AGAINST HIS FOES.

Jeremiah 20:11

But the LORD is with me like a DREAD WARRIOR; therefore my persecutors will stumble and they will not prevail.

Zephaniah 3:17

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The LORD, your God, is in your midst, A WARRIOR WHO GIVES VICTORY; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love: he will exult over you with loud singing

By the time of Revelation, the people of God are believers in His Christ. So it is appropriate that Christ becomes the Divine Warrior who fights on behalf of the Church against its foes. We affirm that when we sing:

*Christ the royal Master leads against the foe
Forward unto victory see His banners go.....
Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,
But the church of Jesus constant will remain
Gates of hell can never 'gainst the Church prevail
We have Christ's own promise and that cannot fail*

In this fourth Day of the Lord, the church is in a perennial battle against the forces of evil led by Satan. “Like a mighty army moves the Church of God” is the hymnist’s view, but when Christ returns at the head of this army, this battle will be brought to its climax. That final confrontation between good and evil is described for us in chapters 14, 19 and 20. Chapter 14:15 is an important indication of God’s sovereignty in this event, because the command to begin the ‘harvest of the earth’ came from the temple, signifying the dwelling place of God. These chapters show us that at the end time only two types of people are in view – those who follow Christ and those who follow the beast. No one can be neutral, and the victory of Christ has consequences both for the victors and the vanquished.

So thirdly, what faith accepts as certain is that people are headed towards two contrasting destinies, and that there will be a judgement determining the destiny of each individual. The image of “the great white throne” in Revelation 20:11-15 is the image of the last judgement that will determine the fate of Satan, the beast, the false prophets and their followers. God’s sovereign judgement on this group is given in very graphic terms in 14:14-20, 19:17-21 and 20:9-10. These images of fire, blood, burning sulphur and lake of fire has led to what has become known as ‘hellfire and brimstone’ preaching. Many people take these images literally because molten sulphur – (called brimstone in the KJV) is blood red in colour. But in the rest of Scripture what is mentioned have been images of the strength and extent of God’s wrath against evil and His judgement upon it.

Genesis 19:24-25

Then the LORD rained on SODOM AND GOMORRAH SULPHUR AND FIRE from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities,

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and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.

Psalm 11:6

On the WICKED he will rain COALS OF FIRE AND SULPHUR; A SCORCHING WIND shall be the portion of their cup.

Isaiah 30:33

For his BURNING PLACE HAS LONG BEEN PREPARED; truly it is made ready for the king, its PYRE made deep and wide, with FIRE and wood in abundance; the breath of the LORD, like A STREAM OF SULPHUR, kindles it.

Isaiah 66:16

For by FIRE will the LORD execute judgment, and by his sword, on all flesh; and those slain by the LORD shall be many.

We cannot dismiss this aspect of the climax of prophecy. No one mentioned hell more than Jesus and the images in Revelation affirm such a fate. There are many definitions of hell, but what we can say from Revelation with certainty, is that it will mean exclusion from all the blessings of the new heaven and earth. In 21:27 we are told that

“nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

Chapter 22:15 is more specific.

Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.

This list is in accord with the ethical teaching of the early Church and which still stands today. **Galatians 5:19-22** spells it out for us.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I WARN YOU, AS I DID BEFORE, THAT THOSE WHO LIVE LIKE THIS WILL NOT INHERIT THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

All this in turn goes back to prohibitions mentioned in the Levitical Law which, at one and the same time, revealed God’s holiness by explicitly defining what He approved and disapproved of; and the behaviour He expected of His people,

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behaviour which He intended to be a witness to the pagan peoples they lived amongst. What is prohibitive to Paul in Galatians still applies to the people of God today, and are still intended to be a witness to those around us. Thus, in detailing those who will be excluded, it logically follows that they will be eternally separated not only from the blessings of eternity, but more disastrously, separated forever from the presence of God. We saw at Easter, Christ’s anguish at just a temporary separation. The graphic description of hell given, symbolically conveys the conscious anguish of those who will be eternally God-forsaken.

But for the followers of the Lamb, whose names are written in the “book of life”, the contrasting destiny of eternal blessedness stretches extravagant language to its limits. Inclusion in the New Jerusalem is their ultimate destiny. It has to be admitted that this is a difficult vision because Biblical references portray it in different ways. These are the options, all of which can be supported by Scripture.

What are the options?

1. The New Jerusalem is an actual place.
2. The New Jerusalem is the Church = the Bride of Christ.
3. The New Jerusalem is God’s presence.
4. The New Jerusalem is an image offered by John as a contrast to Babylon.
5. The New Jerusalem is the ultimate place of safety, security and prosperity.

This image can be all of these things. God’s presence can be in the midst of a city or its people. The spiritual Jerusalem is a contrast to the worldly Babylon and for Christians, it will be a place of safety, security and prosperity in contrast to their present precarious position in society. That would be especially encouraging and comforting to any Christian community that found itself under hostile external pressure.

The Scripture that suggests the New Jerusalem is a place starts with Jesus Himself Jesus who said in John 14: **I go to prepare a place for you.....**

God revealed to Isaiah of the creation of a place.

Isaiah 65:18

But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

Here city and people appear to be separate. And in Hebrews the city is also separate from its inhabitants.

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Hebrews 12:22-24

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, AND TO the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, AND TO God the judge of all, AND TO the spirits of the righteous made perfect, AND TO Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, AND TO the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Zechariah sees it as the dwelling PLACE of God and this is the concept that comes to the fore in Revelation for the presence of God is paramount.

Zechariah 8:3

THUS SAYS THE LORD: I WILL RETURN TO ZION, AND WILL DWELL IN THE MIDST OF JERUSALEM; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain.

The presence of God becomes prominent in the description of the city as a perfect cube. The only other similar construction in the Bible is the Holy of Holies within the temple, which symbolised the presence of God. God's presence is also confirmed by the fact that there was no longer a need for a physical temple.

Revelation 21:22-23

**I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.
(Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path)**

Written centuries apart, the closeness of wording here is totally remarkable for Jesus was the word become flesh.

Isaiah 60:19-20

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; BUT THE LORD WILL BE YOUR EVERLASTING LIGHT, and your God will be your glory. Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; FOR THE LORD WILL BE YOUR EVERLASTING LIGHT, and your days of mourning shall be ended.

Ezekiel 43:4-5

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AS THE GLORY OF THE LORD ENTERED THE TEMPLE by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; AND THE GLORY OF THE LORD FILLED THE TEMPLE.

Since light is only recognisable in a place, this too points to the New Jerusalem being a place. But this impression changes when the image of the ‘Bride’ is introduced.

Revelation 19:7-9

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; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure”—FOR THE FINE LINEN IS THE RIGHTEOUS DEEDS OF THE SAINTS. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.”

Revelation 21:1-2

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. And I saw the HOLY CITY, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, PREPARED AS A BRIDE ADORNED FOR HER HUSBAND.

Revelation 21:9-10

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you THE BRIDE, THE WIFE OF THE LAMB.” And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and SHOWED ME THE HOLY CITY JERUSALEM COMING DOWN OUT OF HEAVEN FROM GOD.

In these references, the New Jerusalem is the church and from that we would conclude that the New Jerusalem is a people rather than a place. From this we can see that concentration on individual images can lead to confusion, but if we compare them with other Biblical teaching, we can with certainty say that collectively, all these images convey the same message – that of the eternal union of the Divine Godhead and redeemed humanity. That is the ultimate climax of prophecy because according the revelation given to Ezekiel 37:27-28, God said:

My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.

Revelation 21:3

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And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with me and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

It's a personal opinion, but maybe Scripture gives us these different images simply because the New Jerusalem encompasses such perfection of location and inhabitants that one image could not convey the wonder of it. Taken together, what we can say is that it will be a location of unadulterated happiness, prosperity, peace and blessing. It will be free from all corrupting, polluting, debilitating or fatal threats. It will be freedom from everyone and everything that threatened Christians in this world. It is life in the fullest sense for all that threatens life will be excluded. But the major point is the visible manifestation of **THE GLORY OF GOD AND HIS AWESOME SUPERIORITY OVER THE BEST/WORST THAT EARTH CAN DO.**

The New Jerusalem is the ultimate climax of prophecy for it is the consummation of God's purpose for His creation. It is the crowning climax of the success of the work of Christ in salvation. It is the irrefutable confirmation that God's control over all that happens in this world is directed towards this conclusion.

And that brings us to a final certainty. From a personal perspective, Christians can look forward to Christ's second coming with great expectations, joy and sense of a righteous sense of triumph. We can imagine a personal reaction in the words

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks, eternal, bright and fair;
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore
When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

But we will rejoice even more because our faith will be vindicated for all to see as Jesus' lordship is given universal recognition. As Paul tells us: every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of the Father.

I hope that these talks have shown that Revelation is far more than a prophecy about the end of the world. We are privileged that God has given us a book like Revelation. There are parts that perhaps we will never be able to fully understand because we are coming to it nearly 2000 years after it was written and from a completely different culture. In spite of this, we can still recognise that our world and our Church experience is not much different from John's environment – the situations just manifest themselves in a different way. But

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from the perspective of the sovereignty of God, we can take from John the absolute assurance that the inspiring visions of God and Christ that he used to encourage the Christians in his day, are even more relevant to us today. From that perspective, in spite of all that we see in the world around us, we can see the reality behind it all, is the all-powerful all-knowing and everywhere presence of a sovereign God and His Christ, with whom we will spend eternity when the climax of prophecy comes, for as the writer to the Hebrews in 13:8 tells us.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever

So we can echo, John's community in praying.

Revelation 22:20

.....Amen. Come Lord Jesus.