

# *You Can't*

God's amazing grace in an age of darkness

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# You Can't

by Andrew Paul Cannon

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*O* to grace how great a debtor

Daily I'm constrained to be!  
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.

*P*rone to wander, Lord, I feel it,

Prone to leave the God I love;  
Here's my heart, O take and seal it,  
Seal it for Thy courts above.

Robert Robinson, 1758

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# Chapter One

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## **The Serpent's False Gospel**

Do you remember that story? The one in the front of the Bible about Adam and Eve? You know, the couple who disobeyed God, ate from a tree, and had to be removed from paradise? Yeah, this is where our story begins. The story of Adam and Eve is not a story primarily about this couple and their sin. No, the main character is not the first man and woman. The main character is God.

After all, it was God who created the universe. It was God who caused the tree to bear fruit. It was God who formed the people and gave them the ability to choose. It was God who gave the command and gave the possibility for people to sin. It was God who punished. It was God who restored. It is God who offered even these two rebels a chance to be renewed to life. If God gave us a book and a story where He is the main character, I have to wonder why we read it as though its primary focus is on us? While we make the mistake of reading the Bible like it was somehow meant to guide us to

success or happiness, God intends it for one purpose: that He might reveal Himself to us through the reporting of what He has done, what He has said, and the instruction that He has given.

The contrast is stark. It is the reason many of our churches, youth ministries, evangelism efforts, family times, worship services, prayer lives, personal quiet times, Sunday School classes, Small Groups, and so on all seem so shallow in our modern context. It is the difference between life and death. It is the deviation of darkness from light. It's like looking at one of those sculptures that is only clear from one angle. From a natural perspective, the sculpture looks like the artist made random chisels and called it art. As we tilt our heads or as we shift just slightly to the right, we see the image that the artist wants us to see. When we look at Scripture selfishly, as the world does, we see a "how-to" manual for this life. The instruction and the revelation of God, though, is something quite different and infinitely more awe inspiring. This is something that the first man and woman, yes remember them, would learn in Genesis, chapter 3.

Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He

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said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You can't eat from any tree in the garden'?"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit from the trees in the garden. But about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden, God said, 'You must not eat it or touch it, or you will die.'"

"No! You will not die," the serpent said to the woman. "In fact, God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." Then the woman saw that the tree was good for food and delightful to look at, and that it was desirable for obtaining wisdom. So she took some of its fruit and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves (Genesis 3:1-7).

Remember, God is the main character in His story. God created the serpent. God created the people. God gave the people a choice. The serpent, which has at this point deviated from the order of creation,<sup>1</sup> has introduced a false gospel. You can obtain knowledge like God's knowledge by taking these certain steps. The serpent has now proclaimed a message of self-help. He has introduced a do-it-yourself plan by which

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<sup>1</sup> Whether this verse is interpreted as a literal serpent or a symbol to mean Satan, the creature (whether physical or spiritual) has somehow acted against the Creator and the Creator has allowed it.

Adam and Eve could pursue the very knowledge of God. The serpent, acting in contradiction with God's created order, has delivered a short "how-to" sermon that is sure to achieve righteousness or the knowledge of God for Adam and Eve.

Sound familiar? It should. The serpent's false gospel is proclaimed from a multitude of pulpits today. You've heard it. I know you have. This is how you pursue Christ. This is how you live as a Christian. This is how you can know God more. This is how you live a satisfying life.

Granted, not every time a statement like these is used is it being used contrary to the Gospel of Christ. When these are the focus of the local church, though, Christ is not preeminent according to our perspective. He is not the focal point. Just like Adam and Eve, we are so guilty of pursuing righteousness and knowledge on our own. As a result, the "how-to" gospel has permeated humanity from the serpent's deception through our modern day. Adam and Eve assumed that they were the main characters. We sometimes see Adam and Eve as the main characters. We also assume that we are somehow, even though we are merely creatures, also the main characters of God's story.

Adam and Eve, realizing their shame, then took it upon themselves to cover that shame. The "how-to" gospel took

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root. It quickly became pervasive. It was, in an instant, the dominant view upon the earth. The distressing and troubling fact is that this is the gospel that has taken root and grown to maturity in most of the congregations and religious peoples today.

Islam states that people must first submit. Hinduism claims that we somehow ought to work our way through the castes and if our karma is good enough, we will escape the process of reincarnation. Mormonism states that salvation is by works. The Jehovah's Witness is taught that if the law is kept, he or she gets to become a god like Jesus did. The materialist believes that a good life is achieved on this earth by virtue of hard work. The Catholic is justified by repentance and penance. Let's not forget us evangelicals, those who belong to the great heritage of the protestant reformers. From far too many of our pulpits, we hear the same type of "how-to" gospel that is not distinguishable from the messages of other worldviews. From many of our congregations the message of the serpent is heard. We see it in our movies and we hear it on popular Christian radio.

"Go to church and your life will be better!"

"You just need to have enough faith."

"You need to obey the commands of Christ."

“You don’t have a good marriage because you have not modeled it after Christ.”

“This is how you can be a good parent.”

“This is how you can know God better.”

“This is how you grow your church.”

“This is how you reach the next generation.”

“This is how...”

This is the serpent’s gospel. Wait! I thought God was the main character. Perhaps it might be a good idea to see what God’s response is when the serpent’s gospel permeates and becomes pervasive among people that God desires to come to Him.

The Lord God made clothing out of skins for Adam and his wife, and He clothed them.

The Lord God said, “Since man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil, he must not reach out, take from the tree of life, eat, and live forever.” So the Lord God sent him away from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. He drove man out and stationed the cherubim and the flaming, whirling sword east of the garden of Eden to guard the way to the tree of life (Genesis 3:21-24).



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God created. God gave choice. God restored. The “how-to” of humanity led away from God. God, in His own glory and in His own majesty, took on the role of restorer. Really, who better to restore God’s creation than the original artist, God Himself? He replaced the garments that Adam and Eve made to cover their own shame with a garment sewed by His own hand. He separated humanity from the tree of life, signifying that there is no “how-to” regarding eternity and regarding a relationship with Himself. Instead, people would have to serve the “how-to” gospel that they believed. He would have to work the ground and wait for God’s redemption from the “how-to” methodology that the serpent shared with him. God restored and there was nothing Adam and Eve could do to earn that restoration.

Thus, we receive the doctrine of God’s grace. There is nothing we can do. Want to know how you can achieve heaven? Want to know how you can legitimately grow your church? Want to know how you can live a happy life, or your best life now? The Gospel of Christ makes this declaration: You Can’t.

Sadly, this means that most people who have called themselves Christians have believed and followed, instead, the gospel of the serpent. It means many preachers today

misrepresent God's inspired word by preaching the gospel of the serpent. It also means that there are many multitudes of people who believe themselves to be saved when, in reality, they, like Adam and Eve, have feasted on the forbidden fruit.

With this book, I am going to move against the grain of the prevalent false gospel. What I will not do is write a self-help book. I am not going to tell you how to know God more or how to receive salvation. My goal is simple. I want to share with a self-help world that we are insufficient; but where we cannot, God can. To those who are in church leadership, my prayer is that this message is received in humility. To those who are church members, my prayer is that it is received responsibly. To those who have rejected Christ or who want nothing to do with the church, I pray it is received with an open mind. For, in my pride I came to Christ. In His mercy He accepted me, drew me in, and began to bring about righteousness in me because I could not reach the fruit of eternal life.

# Chapter two

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## **Christ, not Us**

It is odd to think of the book of revelation to be relevant in our day. We think of it primarily as describing future events and the end of the world. This designation, though, does not represent John's letter well even in the slightest degree.

Before we get into John's Revelation, I do need to make a couple of preliminary statements that will carry us through the remainder of this book. First, the purpose of John's letter (the book of Revelation) was to implore believers to stay faithful to God in a time of persecution and to encourage them as the whole world turned against them. Second, the book of Revelation does not present us with a timeline of future events. Trying to figure out chronology distracts us from the intended purpose for the book. Third, though the book contains many symbols, it is not a book primarily of symbolism. There have been many people who get so concerned and caught up with interpreting what a

symbol may or may not be, that the message of the book was neglected.

Considering these things, we notice that there is a proper way to understand this book. We are not to be concerned with chronology or heavily concerned with interpreting symbols to mean something that is vague or to be some future thing that did not exist as John described what he saw. Since John wrote his letter for people in his time in a way that the people of his time would understand, that is how we must read it. Revelation contains past, present and future events, but is specifically about the coming eternal reign of Christ and the hope that God's people have in a world of great tribulation. Tribulation... That sounds like the world we live in today doesn't it?

We do experience quite a few tribulations on this earth. We experience hurt. People leave us. Our loved ones pass on. We struggle with health problems. Children rebel and act out. Sometimes parents are just a little overbearing. There are many who are persecuted because of their faith or because they stand up for what is right. As John writes to the churches in tribulation, the message he shares is going to be more than relevant for our lives. Sometimes the hardship seems more than overwhelming. We are stressed to the core and it seems

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like the world only takes from us without giving us a break. When we are bruised and battered in this life, during this time of tribulation, how do we begin to find peace and find the motivation to press on? How do we rise above the hurt so that we might move forward? Is it even worth trying to rise above the tribulations of this life? There is the question again. How? Not to worry, though. This question is often asked to draw our attention to Christ. Scripture answers this question differently than we might. The question, then, may be a good question to ask; but the method we give or justify is sometimes too self-centered to represent Christ's Gospel. Adam and Eve could have asked that question (How?) and not sinned. They turned from God when they answered that question with human methodology rather than with trust in God.

Now, where were we? Yes, life of tribulation. How do we go on?

The revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave Him to show His slaves what must quickly take place. He sent it and signified it through His angel to His slave John, who testified to God's word and to the testimony about Jesus Christ, in all he saw. The one who reads this is blessed, and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it are blessed, because the time is near!

John:

To the seven churches in Asia.

Grace and peace to you from the One who is, who was, and who is coming; from the seven spirits before His throne; and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To Him who loves us and has set us free from our sins by His blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father — the glory and dominion are His forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see Him,  
including those who pierced Him.  
And all the families of the earth  
will mourn over Him.

This is certain. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the One who is, who was, and who is coming, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:1-8).

### **The things that must soon take place**

In his introduction, here, John states that he is writing to reveal the things that must soon take place. John is writing this letter from his time in exile in about the year A.D. 95. Not only this, but as we move through John's letter we see him describing some things that were going on during his own time (mainly in the first three chapters as he addresses the seven churches specifically). We have now come along years

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after John wrote this letter, approximately 1,922 years (but who is counting?). If John stated that the things he prophesied would come about soon after he wrote, then we have to come to some sort of realization. It has been a long time since John made some of the prophecies that he did later in this account. It is possible, in fact it seems likely, that some of the things (not all) either have happened already or are happening in our present age. As I said before, it is so difficult, in fact it is impossible, to develop a chronology of events through John's Revelation.

It is here that we actually have to make a shift in the way that we think so that we can understand the text of Scripture rightly. We tend to read the text of Scripture like a 21<sup>st</sup> century American. In America, and in our current age, there is an obsession with the event of the apocalypse. One of the most popular television shows in the United States is about a Zombie apocalypse. In new movies that are coming out, so much destruction is portrayed on the screen. As a culture, we are obsessed with the end of the world and the destruction that may overtake our planet. We value people who can discover hidden meanings and interpret symbols in a way that is not obvious. We love mysteries that have to be figured out.

Consequently, this is how we read apocalyptic literature<sup>2</sup> in the Bible. We read the book of Revelation to be a book of mass destruction, the end of the world, hidden meanings, and mystery.

In contrast to this, the seven churches to whom John wrote were churches trapped in persecution. They were churches and people going through tribulation in their current context. Through this book, John does not primarily describe destruction, but restoration. He does not primarily speak mystery, but revelation. He does not write concerning the end of the world, but the end of tribulation for people who have loved God. He describes a day when Christ will be seen by all people and when He will reveal His own preeminence. When John states that there are some things that will soon take place, he is referring to the coming of King Jesus and the events that must take place for the world to be restored and brought out of tribulation. As we read this book and as we study it together, we must read it like a Christian under persecution and in tribulation who is being offered the hope of a world restored.

Here I learn that God is not concerned with our

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<sup>2</sup> Apocalyptic literature is a prophetic genre in both the Old Testament (Daniel) and here in the New Testament. It does not refer to the end of the world, but is a term that refers specifically to the types of symbolism used.



knowing the order of events or His timeframe. In fact, Jesus even stated during his time physically present on this earth that people would not know the time or the hour at which things would take place (Matthew 24:36, Mark 13:32, Acts 1:7). It is ironic that we have come up with so many eschatological theories regarding the time at which things will or might happen. People often ask me whether I am pre-millennial, a-millennial, or post-millennial. My answer is simple, "I am pan-millennial. I believe that everything will pan out in the end!" While I do have my opinions, it is pointless for us to try and specifically and strictly define a timeline of events. God is much more concerned with offering His people hope in times of tribulation, a tribulation that Christ stated would begin by the end of the generation that was with Him physically on this earth almost 2,000 years ago (Matthew 24:34).

Secondly, I learn that God is not concerned with giving an unsolvable mystery that we cannot understand. John's purpose was to reveal, not to encrypt. Revelation, overall, is a book that is far easier to understand than we might think. We, people who are obsessed with destruction and with the end of the world, tend to overcomplicate things so that we can make them fit our interests. God, though, is concerned with

revealing His glory to us, warning the world plainly, and giving us a tangible reason to maintain hope even in times of tribulation. It is almost as if God is the main character and we are not. God is not a trickster or a deceiver. He has made His message plain to us and all we have to do is read or listen. Often we will hear someone who claims to be something special say that they have a secret message for us from God, that they have found the hidden code in the text of Scripture, or that they know the hidden meaning of the book of Revelation. These are lies and we should be skeptical when someone makes such claims. John states very clearly in the first verse that his purpose is to show or reveal, not to hide or encode. This being said, I want the reader to know something. I would much rather you be reading and studying the text of Scripture right now than reading a book that I have written. Scripture does more justice to the revelation of God than do the scratchings of Andrew Cannon.

John even goes further to insist that the words of this letter and prophecy are easily understood as we move into verse 3, “The one who reads this is blessed, and those who hear the words of this prophecy and keep what is written in it are blessed, because the time is near!”

The message of this book is available to anyone who

will read and anyone who would listen as it is read. It is discernible because it is possible for people to consider and heed the words that John wrote. John, here, says that anyone who actually takes the time to read or listen to the message in this letter is blessed. Thus, I realize something else about the nature of this letter: It is specifically for the purpose of blessing, not condemnation. We tend to read the book of Revelation as a book about punishment. While there are punishments described and while God's wrath is evident in this book, it is primarily a book of blessing, not condemnation. We must be careful to read this as a book of blessing, then, and not primarily a book of God's wrath.

### **Nature of our citizenship**

After giving his purpose statement, John makes an address to seven specific churches. These churches were probably the bigger churches along the postal route of the time. This letter would arrive at each of these seven churches and the message would probably be distributed to other churches in the areas. It is a message that all believers can benefit from. In his address, John states the nature of the churches' existence and their entire reason for being. In verses 5-6, we see that it is only through Christ that the people have

been released from their sins. Only by the authority of Christ do we have the right to be children of God. This is not by our own works, but it is specifically the work of Christ. There cannot be a how-to because salvation is not our work. When we are redeemed by the work of Christ, He makes us to be a kingdom. If we think we are good at organizing and we think the church exists because of our administrative skill-set, we are mistaken. If we think it is our planning that grows a ministry or our ability to relate to people or our focus on relevance, then we have likely perpetrated the serpent's false gospel and have likely led people away from Christ. It is Christ and Christ alone who makes us to be a kingdom. If any church relies on its own administration rather than on the person of Christ, it is not a church that Christ is in and it is not a church that has received God's blessing. Christ must be preeminent. If He is not, then the growth that we achieve numerically is achieved in vain.

Not only has Christ made the church body a kingdom, but He has also made each believer that makes up the church a "priest to His God and Father." This is a metaphor that the church would have understood because much of the church John was writing to was made up of Jews who had placed their faith in Christ. In the Jewish system, it was the priest

who represented God to the people. Here, John is saying that every believer is a priest because that is what Christ has made him or her. Every believer is God's representative to others.

We have to understand what this might sound like to the church under the persecution of Rome and in the midst of great tribulation. First, if Christ has made every believer a priest or a revealer of God, it means God is intimately present with them. We cannot reveal something that we cannot see ourselves. God was intimately present with them in their time of tribulation. In the same sense, God is intimately present with us during the times of tribulation in our lives. Even in those times when we cannot sense Him, He is always near us and is always drawing us nearer to Himself. This is a blessing in times of hurt and in times of need for those who are under the lordship of Christ.

Secondly, it means that every believer was, and is, called to represent God to the people. If God is intimately present with believers, then there is desperate need for God to be revealed to people who have not yet trusted in Christ. John was saying something to the effect of, "God is with you. Stay the course. Keep the faith. Let God use you to reveal Him to the people around you." The church was, and is, to be focussed outwardly. It is to reveal Christ to the community and

not just be concerned with self. It is to invite people in, even people who are lost in sin. Even in the context of the seven churches that John is writing this letter to, there was the entirety of Rome coming against the believers, and John insinuates something to the effect of, “Reveal God to them!” John was telling the believers that they were a light to the whole world and that they were to be concerned with representing God to the world, not concerned with only their own survival. This idea is plain in Scripture and throughout John's letter:

1. In Exodus 25, we see God command that a lamp stand be fashioned for the Tabernacle. This could have been a constant sign that God was with the people and that it was through this people that God would bless all nations (as He promised to Abraham in Genesis 22:18).
2. John adopted the symbolism of the lamp stand for the New Testament Church. Every local church was a lamp stand according to Revelation 1:20. This meant that God was with the local churches and it was the local churches' responsibility to bless all people as each believer revealed God to those outside of the church, even the Romans who persecuted them.
3. In chapters 2-3, God actually threatens to remove the

lamp stand (His presence and the ability of a congregation to reveal Him) from the churches that depended on themselves instead of on Christ, which meant proclaiming the gospel of the serpent or committing the 'how-to' heresy. It is possible for God to remove His presence and witness from a local church when that church fails to be the church.

4. In chapter 11, verse 4, John mentions two witnesses: two lamp stands provided oil by two olive trees representing the witness of the church powered by the Holy Spirit (John bases his descriptions on the text of Zechariah 4).

Every believer has God and every believer is to be concerned with revealing God to people who are without God. This is a great encouragement in times of tribulation. We do not need to depend on pastors or professional evangelists. In fact, if we do depend on our leaders instead of Christ we are committing idolatry. Our level of education does not matter. We are all priests and the church is a lamp stand that is empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So, we find this comfort. When we are in a time of great tribulation. When children are rebelling, when parents

seem overbearing, when we have lost a loved one, when we struggle with our health, when there are family problems, when we feel lonely, or even when we are persecuted; God is intimately present with us because we are His kingdom of priests. This is why we don't place our dependance on a preacher, pastor, teacher, deacon, boss, mayor, governor or president. It is why defining our ministries by their methodology, level of fun had, the goodness of the music or the genre and energy in the sermon is contrary to the message of Christ. Our dependance is completely and utterly on God. This is what enables us to be the lamp stand that Christ has made us. When we depend too heavily on people, we become revealers of those people, not revealers of God. Every believer is a priest called to reveal God in utter dependance on Him.

So, we answer the question, How do we go on in times of tribulation? Is there a life change that we can make? Can we be strong enough? Do we need to pray more or have more faith? Do I need to read more, go back to school, get a better job, be a better husband, or give my life to Christ? All of these solutions make us the main characters. The answer is, we cannot. We must be brought through it. This is the work of God's grace.



## **Everyone will see Christ**

John finishes this introduction by encouraging his readers once again, “Christ is coming!” John was quoting from Daniel 7:13, where Daniel wrote of a day when the Ancient of Days would come and establish His kingdom forevermore and His people would reign everlastingly on the earth. John also quoted Zechariah 12:10, saying that those who persecuted Christ would mourn because they had denied Him.

To a people living in great tribulation, there is a promise that if we have truly given ourselves to Christ, there will be a day when we will reign under the Lordship of Christ. There was reason for the people of God to endure the persecution of the Roman government at this point! There is also reason for us to endure the great tribulation that we face in this life. That reason is not us, it is God. For those who genuinely believe in Christ, Christ will return and, according to Daniel (whom John quotes in the above passage), God's people will reign on the earth as God created them to do (Genesis 1:28). God is the one who restores and He restores according to His design.

There is another side to this promise. Those who have not genuinely believed in the person of Christ will see Christ and will mourn because they persecuted Christ. Those who

persecute God's people and do not turn to Christ will mourn when Christ does return. No one who chooses to remain outside of God's grace will go unpunished for their wrongdoing. If the church is a lamp stand, then it is not our obligation to punish sinners in our current age. That would, again, be a human centered way of accomplishing what we think to be God's work. I might reiterate this notion: many who claim to belong to God in our day actually operate according to the serpent's false gospel. In contrast, we are to invite even our persecutors to join us in Christ. We are to invite even the worst of sinners to join us in Christ. When people decline our invitation, it is God who reserves the responsibility for condemnation in His own timing, and it is not yet His timing.

So, we resolve to be a lamp stand. We represent God to the world beyond our walls. We know that in our tribulation, God is intimately present with us and that He promises His people will reign over the earth under His direction. We invite everyone in, knowing that it is God's responsibility, and His alone, to condemn in His timing. Finally, we arrive at the most powerful statement in John's introduction. It is what God states about Himself: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "the One who is, who was, and who is coming,

the Almighty.” For those in Christ, this is the greatest of all encouragements. For those who are not, it is the greatest warning. As we move through the book of revelation, this is going to be a constant theme. Those who do not belong to God or have, for some reason stopped striving toward Him in the difficulties of life will receive warning as John warned the those in the seven churches. People who belong to God and strive toward Him will be encouraged in the difficulties of life as John wrote for the encouragement of those who would either read or listen.

We are but two chapters in, and already we can see a dichotomy forming and a dilemma that every person is faced with. Do we place our faith in the true Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ, or do we subscribe to the serpent’s false gospel? The serpent’s gospel looks like good news and might even provide some information that looks good for us. Rise above your tribulation by following steps 1, 2, and 3! Follow this simple guide to reach mellenials! Grow your guest attendance by 300 percent! Follow these steps to be a good wife or a good mother! Judge the quality of a church by the genre of music and the talent of the musicians! Require your pastor to fulfill your unbiblical expectations and you will be blessed! This gospel will ultimately let us down and will never achieve the

life that Christ has for us. In Christ's Gospel, the true good news, we are less and He is more. Less is required of us and it is not guaranteed that we will prosper according to the ways of the world.

We even see that while Jesus was being tempted (Matthew 4), Satan is the one who promised every gain while the way of Christ was a way of personal sacrifice. I do so wish we heard the true Gospel from more of our churches today, for only Christ has the words of eternal life.

# Chapter three

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## **Repentance, not Perfection**

When I was little, I remember starting to build a clubhouse on our property with my dad. This club house was going to be the best clubhouse anyone had ever seen because my dad built houses for a living and he was the best at what he did. We had some extra 2x4's by the shed, and my brother and I decided that we would get started early (while my dad was at work). We started putting the 2x4's together with our hammers and some nails, and after about twenty minutes we completely lost interest in what we were doing. We were excited. Our clubhouse was going to be the greatest! It did not take long for us to begin thinking about something else and lose interest in what we once thought might be the greatest thing ever!

In Revelation 1:9-20, we read that Christ is the one who stands among the local churches and holds the messengers of those churches in His right hand. The local church exists under Christ and the messengers (or preachers) of those churches are held up by Christ. The local church

exists for Christ and the messengers speak on Christ's behalf to the churches. There can be no other way of operation. Christ must be preeminent. We have also discovered so far that God is intimately present with the people of His church. We are priests in His kingdom because He has made us such. Accordingly, the people of the local church, and the whole of the church itself, are to be revealers of God to the people.

After describing the local church in this way and giving the local church the purpose that he did, John addresses Seven Specific churches in Asia. He tells them what they are doing that is good and what they are doing that is evil in the sight of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Different bodies of believers in our current age look like the churches John writes to in this part of the letter. If we are imperfect people, then we form an imperfect local church. If we are an imperfect local church, God calls us both as a body and as individuals to very specific and long-suffering action. We are going to look at one of these short addresses and draw parallels between it and John's addresses to the other six churches. I pray that we are all humble enough to receive the instruction that God has for us in this portion of His Word. Where do we fall short? In what area do we need to draw nearer to God; or in respect to the inclination of this book, does God want to draw us nearer to

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Himself? Is it possible that part of our fallen condition is indeed the tendency for us to lose our interest or passion? Why do we find marriage easy at first and then more difficult as time progresses? Why is it that we celebrate new friends and new leaders, and then always seem to find some sort of difficulty as time progresses? Why is it that churches seem to do well at first and then fall with time? Why are parents excited when a child is born or adopted and then voice nothing but frustration later in the child's life? Why do students start a relationship with a boyfriend or girlfriend, think it is the one that will last, and then break up one week later (adults have the same problem)? Why are we excited when we begin a new job, and then complain about that job more and more as time passes?

Might it be that every person has a tendency to lose passion or interest because every person lives in this fallen condition that we find ourselves in? Might it be that we all need desperate help when it comes to things like commitment and long-suffering? Might it be that the how-to gospel will not aid us at all in this life?

“Write to the angel of the church in Ephesus:  
“The One who holds the seven stars in His right

hand and who walks among the seven gold lampstands says: I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate evil. You have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and you have found them to be liars. You also possess endurance and have tolerated many things because of My name and have not grown weary. But I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place — unless you repent. Yet you do have this: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

“Anyone who has an ear should listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. I will give the victor the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in God’s paradise” (Revelation 2:1-7).

## **Introduction**

In chapters two and three, we see a basic format that John uses to outline what Christ wants him to communicate with each local church. He introduces Jesus, compliments the local church on what it is doing well, offers an indictment against the local church for where it fails to honor God, tells the church the consequence if it continues doing the things that do not honor God, and then describes the reward for those who repent and turn from their current pattern of destruction.

In every introduction, John addresses the angel of the



specific local church. The word angel in english is transliterated from the greek αγγελω, which literally means messenger. Any time we see the word “angel” in the New Testament, it is a word that specifically means messenger and can either refer to a heavenly messenger (what we might refer to as an angel) or an earthly messenger (a person carrying a message). In this case, John is addressing the preacher or teacher of each church. I learn something important about church structure as I read these introductions. Christ is preeminent. He holds the preacher in His right hand. The preacher has one job: that is to declare the Word of the Lord as it is given. He can do nothing more and He can do nothing less. The message of Christ must become the message of the preacher. To do anything else is to deny the very message of God. A preacher who talks more about his own life than about the text of Scripture, then, cannot be a messenger. A proclaimer who devotes more time to certain subjects than Scripture does is not a messenger. Christ, here, seems to have appointed one messenger over each church. While we see a model in Scripture that supports having multiple pastors in each local church, Christ specifically selects a messenger to proclaim His message to the people of each local church.

In this specific letter, John repeats that it is Christ who

walks among the local churches (described as lamp stands), holding each messenger in His right hand. This is going to tie into John's message to the church in Ephesus because this particular local church had lost sight of Christ. What this means is that it is possible for a local church to lose sight of Christ. It is possible for us to lose our passion for the risen Lord and not even realize what is happening. John will point this out in verse 4.

### **Complement**

After introducing the word from Christ, John complements each church, except two. In Revelation 3, we read of two local churches of whom Christ had nothing good to say. The church in Sardis was a church that had a reputation of being alive, but was dead. It was a church that, in our modern day, would be growing in number, starting new ministries, and growing in popularity and is yet dead according to the standards of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The people did not actually know Christ. A church may experience great growth because it genuinely follows Christ. It is also possible for a church to grow in number, looking alive when it is actually dead. Let us be certain that we are alive, else growth means nothing. Furthermore, every church leader

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should be careful of growing their churches or ministries according to the serpent's how-to gospel. Games and concert-style music may be entertaining and may bring a crowd, but can turn any church, ministry or person toward the gospel of how-to's.

The second is the church in Laodicea, which had lost its passion and grown complacent. The people became more concerned with comfort and resting in their possessions than it did about advancing God's kingdom. Complacency should never be the position of any local church, and we ought to never worship numbers. When we focus on numbers, we fail to focus on Christ. When we allow our want to be comfortable keep us from actually advancing God's kingdom, we insinuate that we are more important than God; which is precisely the message of the serpent's sermon.

In our passage for today, John compliments the church in Ephesus, recognizing that it does not tolerate those who are evil. It is a church that is upstanding when it comes to issues of morality and that it recognizes false teachers. The church in Ephesus endured through issues relating to morality and persevered for Christ's name's sake.

I find that this represents most local churches in the United States really well. We are so good at standing our

ground on issues of morality. We represent Christ's standard for right and wrong. Even if we sometimes don't defend godly morality in a God-honoring manner, the complement of the Ephesian church is also a complement of many local churches in the United States. God is pleased when we represent His moral standard. In many instances, we also tend to confuse our moral standard with God's. It is very important for us to always strive to measure morality according to God's standard and not our own. Many times defending God's moral standard is going to cause us to be wrong and we need to be okay with that.

### **Indictment**

After complementing each church (except for two), John moves on and points out the shortfalls of each church. What surprises me, here, is that there are two out of the seven churches where God does not point to shortfalls that they have. The church in Smyrna was a church that existed with little or no material wealth. It was a church that was impoverished and where the people were persecuted, yet God has nothing to say against them. He only encourages them to keep enduring. The church in Philadelphia took opportunities that Christ gave and pursued His direction at all costs, and

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Christ did not point out their shortfalls. The people were completely sold out for Christ and pursued every opportunity that Christ provided.

Most of the churches had something wrong with them in Christ's eyes. This is true for the church in Ephesus according to our present text. In verses 4-5, John describes how the church in Ephesus had left its first love. Though they stood for what was right according to Christ's standard, they lost sight of Christ, Himself. They had grown to be so concerned with doing the right thing, pursuing pure doctrine and rejecting evil that good works and good doctrine became their god. Sound much like the serpent's gospel? Yeah, I thought so.

We do experience this in our lives today. Two people get married. There is excitement at first, but as years go by they begin focussing on pleasing one another rather than being with one another and there is a difference. It is one of the reasons so many marital problems persist in our day. Our relationship with Christ is much the same. We get so focussed on doing what is right that we lose sight of the actual person of Christ. Our morality is capable of blinding us. While doing what is right is important, that cannot be our god. If I am going to be completely honest, it is easier for me to focus on

my outward deeds rather than living in relationship with Jesus Christ. Works are easy, relationships are hard. Relationships require constant sacrifice, works only require us to form a habit or put on a good show.

John challenges the Ephesian church to remember from where they had fallen. There was a time when the church did what it did for Christ, then fell to a place where it did those things simply because they were the correct things to do. The church fell into worshipping tradition and method instead of Christ. John begs them to remember where they fell from. If John is pleading with the church to remember, it means the church has probably not realized what has happened and the people still believe that they are following Christ, when in fact, they are not.

Here is where we see some deep application for our own lives. We have a real tendency to start well and finish horribly. A church is planted and there is passion for Christ and the people care about following Christ. Over time the church body regresses into routine or habit and begins worshipping morals and methods. The people do not often recognize what is happening. Such was the case with the Ephesian church. Two people enter into a marriage relationship and there is passion and unmatched love. Over

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time, the couple regresses into routine and begins working to please or be pleased. Married couples often do not recognize what is happening. A new job is started and we have the upmost commitment and passion. Over time we regress into routine and begin going through the motions. We often do not even recognize what is happening. We begin building a clubhouse and lose passion and interest. The truth is that there is a clubhouse for all of us. We must ask ourselves if we, like the Ephesian church, have stopped following Christ in order to focus on method, rules, organization, comfort or even to focus on ourselves. If we are guilty, Christ calls us to repentance! We must turn to Christ once again and that is where we find both our passion and our satisfaction. There is no how-to. It is Christ and Christ alone who can bring this about within us.

### **Consequence**

For the church in Ephesus, then, morality and method had become more important than Christ. John pleads with the people to repent. If there was no repentance, Christ threatened to remove His lamp stand from the local body of believers.

If the lamp stand was representative of the church and signified God's presence in the church and witness through the people of the church, then removing the lamp stand is the act

of God removing His presence from a church and removing His witness through the people of the church. This is such a fearful thought for the local church in our current age. If we focus more on morals and method than on Christ, Christ is not pleased. When Christ points that out, we are called to repent and turn back to Him. If the people of the church do not repent, Christ removes His presence and witness from the church. The church becomes unable to reach people with the Gospel. The church becomes a social club or a museum rather than a place where people come for healing.

I want to pause, here, and say this. I hope you are paying attention, brothers and sisters. It is more likely than not that I have now described your church or even you. Keep reading. There is grace. Perhaps this is even the reason that you, as so many in my generation have done, have forsaken the local church. Perhaps it is because of this false gospel that you have not believed in Christ. There is a true and awesome Gospel that the church, her people, and those outside of the community of faith need to hear and it is a Gospel that is not often proclaimed clearly. What we hear most often and in most places and in every corner of the world, is the serpent's heresy.

If we do not recognize Christ's preeminence, Christ can remove our ability to be a church and a kingdom of priests on



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this earth. If we have lost sight of Christ, we must repent. He doesn't just want us to be good people. He wants us to chase after Him because we love Him, and we love Him with such an immense intensity.

Here, we also receive practical insight for our lives. It is not a how-to gospel so much as us allowing the true Gospel to impact the way that we live. It is not Scripture's primary focus, but some application can be made! If we feel like we have drifted apart from those we love, we do not focus on their insufficiencies. We turn our attention from pleasing or being pleased and to them as the person we love. If we have problems with a leader or a boss, we turn our attention from what we perceive as their insufficiencies and to them as a person who is in need of God's grace just as we are. If we lose interest or passion in the things of God, in our relationship with Christ, or in being the local church, the problem is most likely that we have lost sight of our first love (that is the person of Christ). This can happen without us even realizing it.

### **Reward**

If the people repent and turn back to Christ, John describes a reward for every person that turns back to Him or perseveres.

In Ephesus, Jesus states that the one who overcomes moral or method worship and turns to Him will be granted fruit from the tree of life, which is in paradise with God (v. 7). In Smyrna, Jesus declares that the one who overcomes and endures in light of poverty and persecution will not be hurt by the second death (v. 11). In Pergamum, Jesus claims that those who strive to obey God instead of people will receive hidden manna and a white stone with their names on it (v. 17). In Thyatira, Jesus proclaims that those who keep His command until the end will be placed in a position of authority (v. 26). In Sardis, the church full of people who are dead, Jesus says that those who wake up and actually trust in Him will be purified and their names will not be erased from the book of life (3:5). In Philadelphia, Jesus states that those who take opportunities given by Him will be pillars in God's temple (3:12). In Laodicea, Jesus reveals that those who sacrifice earthly comfort will sit on Christ's throne with Him just as He sits on the throne of the Father (3:21).

Here is what I notice in looking at these rewards. There are two options. We will either follow Christ or not. Those who follow Christ will endure, overcome and receive a reward. Those who do not will receive judgment and the consequences of their worship.

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Those of us who persist in the serpent's false gospel will receive the consequence of that Gospel. Adam and Eve suffered pain and were reduced to toil. They lived to die. That was the consequence they suffered in this life. The ramifications for eternity are much more terrible and nightmarish.

If we remember, there were only two churches in this part of Scripture that Christ either found no fault in or did not address their fault. This means that most local churches have something that needs to be corrected. We would do well to operate under the assumption that we always have something that needs to be corrected or improved. There is always something in our hearts on this earth that Christ wants to remove so that we can be made whole. This is the beauty of sanctification: that God would care enough about us to correct us as individuals and as a church.

God, in His perfection, offers imperfect people chances to repent and turn back to Him. It is ironic, here, that we talk of repenting for being moral people. This would be like me cooking dinner for my wife and then having to apologize for it (I don't mean because the food tastes bad, I just mean in general). In actuality, it is repentance for making morality and method our god. It would be like me cooking for my wife

instead of spending time with my wife. This is something that God does not have to do, but does out of His own grace and mercy toward us. There are many times throughout our lives when we have to refocus because our fallen condition causes us to sometimes concentrate on things that distract us from the person and work of Christ. For instance, if we are adamant about being a part of a perfect church that always does the correct thing in the correct way, we will always be sorely disappointed. First, because there is no perfect church body. Second, because our focus is on something less than Christ. If we want to be in the perfect relationship and begin focussing on the imperfections, we will always be disappointed because our attention is on something less than Christ in our relationships. If we want to have the perfect family, the perfect parents, the perfect home, the perfect job, the perfect pastor, the perfect president, or the perfect school, we will absolutely always be disappointed because our focus and our attention is on something less than Christ. We must turn our attention to the person of Christ, or we will not be prepared to deal with our own insufficiencies, let alone the insufficiencies we perceive in others.

Almost all of these churches failed to follow Christ properly, and all of them suffered in some way. What I find to

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be the most striking concept, here, is that Christ was actually present with and actually allowed each church to be a witness for Him in spite of their sins and their imperfection. There is only one instance where Christ threatened to remove His presence and witness and it was when a church was more focussed inwardly on itself than outwardly on Christ and then on others. How much grace does God have and how encouraging is it for us that Christ would offer to use imperfect people like us to be His church? Christ is so good! In our tribulation on this earth, we are in desperate need of God's constant grace, and through that grace, constant and loving correction. According to John's letter, those who belong to God will persevere in this grace and gain the heavenly rewards that Christ has promised in this text! We see the warning for those who do not know Christ and who do not strive after Christ and we see the great promise for those who know Christ and follow hard after Him in every arena of life.

# Chapter four

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## **Sanctification, not Escape**

After John addressed the seven churches in Asia specifically, he describes a great scene around God's throne. He describes the glorious worship of God by all of creation. In the context of this worship, a book is presented before the assembly and no one is found worthy to open its seals. In a courtroom setting in John's time, a scroll would be brought to the judge and only he had authority to break the seal and read the judgment. In this heavenly courtroom setting that John describes, Christ is recognized in the courtroom and is the only one who is found worthy to break the seals and to pronounce judgment upon the world.

As Jesus breaks each seal, we make a realization: God's judgment is not pronounced upon the whole world until all of the seals are broken. As we see the effects that come with the breaking of these seals taking place on the earth today, we take this as a warning that Christ Himself is preparing to pronounce judgment over the whole earth.

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We know, already, that there are great natural disasters. We know that there are great wars where people kill one another. We know that famine causes people to go hungry and that people go hungry even without famine. People die of sickness and disease. People on the earth today are killed because of their religious convictions. People of the earth live in fear, not wanting to recognize God even though He has made Himself known to us.

As John was writing down these descriptions, the churches were under great persecution by the Roman Empire. Their question was, "Will this suffering ever end?" So, I pose the same question. God, when will You make things right?

Then I saw the Lamb open one of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures say with a voice like thunder, "Come!" I looked, and there was a white horse. The horseman on it had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he went out as a victor to conquer.

When He opened the second seal, I heard the second living creature say, "Come!" Then another horse went out, a fiery red one, and its horseman was empowered to take peace from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another. And a large sword was given to him.

When He opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" And I looked, and there

was a black horse. The horseman on it had a set of scales in his hand. Then I heard something like a voice among the four living creatures say, “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius — but do not harm the olive oil and the wine.”

When He opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” And I looked, and there was a pale green horse. The horseman on it was named Death, and Hades was following after him. Authority was given to them over a fourth of the earth, to kill by the sword, by famine, by plague, and by the wild animals of the earth.

When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the people slaughtered because of God’s word and the testimony they had. They cried out with a loud voice: “Lord, the One who is holy and true, how long until You judge and avenge our blood from those who live on the earth?” So a white robe was given to each of them, and they were told to rest a little while longer until the number would be completed of their fellow slaves and their brothers, who were going to be killed just as they had been.

Then I saw Him open the sixth seal. A violent earthquake occurred; the sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair; the entire moon became like blood; the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a high wind; the sky separated like a scroll being rolled up; and every mountain and island was moved from its place.

Then the kings of the earth, the nobles, the military commanders, the rich, the powerful, and every slave and free person hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains. And they said to the mountains



and to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the One seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, because the great day of Their wrath has come! And who is able to stand?” (Revelation 6:1-17).

### **The seals**

In our world today, we see evidence of these seals being broken. Christ is preparing to issue His judgment against the world. If we look forward to chapter 8, we see that the seventh seal contains the blasting of seven trumpets (which will also sound before God's judgment is declared). In chapter 7, verse 3, we learn that God places a seal of protection upon His people before the blaring of the seven trumpets.<sup>3</sup> Since we are not currently protected from the effects on the earth of Christ's action in heaven, we might deduce that the seals are not yet fully broken. When the seals are fully broken, those who genuinely belong to Christ will be protected through the more fierce preliminary judgments that come along with the sounding of the seven trumpets before God's complete judgment is revealed.

Knowing that the preliminary judgments, which come with the breaking of the seals, have been taking place and will continue to take place for the time being, we are still left with

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<sup>3</sup> Conclusion based on Ezekiel 9, 2 Timothy 2:19

the question, why? Why must there be natural disasters? Why must there be persecution? Why must there be death, famine, and sickness? The answer is simple. These things are warning signs that a judgment is coming, and no one who is apart from Christ will be able to withstand it. Why aren't those who belong to Christ immune to these things in our current age? Why must God's people endure the tribulation of the current age? In Revelation 7:14, we read that those who have come out of the great tribulation, which is a term John uses to describe the current struggles of the seven churches, have washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb (Jesus Christ). The tribulation of our current age serves a great purpose for both those who do not know Christ and those who do. For those who do not, the purpose is warning. For those who do and who follow Christ genuinely, the purpose is sanctification. It is the testing that brings about holiness in our lives. It is insurance so we can be sure that when we claim to follow Christ we actually do follow Christ. When we go through trials and tribulation, the faith we claim to have is tested. We will either show that we actually know Christ, or we will show that we do not. We will show that we have either denied ourselves, or have bought into the false gospel of the serpent. We will have either called ourselves

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christian because we attended church to have fun, be entertained, meet girls or better our lives; or we will have sacrificed everything because we are Christ's own. This is a good test for us.

When I was in middle school, I did not know Christ. I considered myself to be a good person and I really did not see the benefit to having faith in Christ. I remember that there was this one girl whom I really liked. I pursued her and got to know her only to be rejected by her. It might have been because at the time I had a white man's afro or because I was kind of a nerdy, wimpy kid; I'm not sure. What I do know is that the rejection stung. It stayed with me. When I did get over it, I hadn't been changed for the better. I may have gotten stronger as a result of my experience, but that doesn't mean I got better. I was the same person. After I gave my life to Christ, there was a girl whom I dated for about three years. I found out that she cheated on me and our relationship was over. It stung, too. I realize now looking back that this small tribulation caused less damage than the other. I was more equipped to deal with the pain. As I recovered, I now notice that God was using a tribulation in my life to make me more holy, or to conform me more to the image of Christ. He didn't cause the tribulation specifically, and the tribulation did not

specifically have a purpose in and of itself; but God did use it. There is a clear difference between when we experience tribulation as someone who has not given self to Christ and when we experience tribulation as someone who has.

When we question our own salvation or our own relationship with Christ, the fruit that we show in times of tribulation is evidence of the faith that we have. Without tribulation, we would have no reason to trust Christ in our fallen condition because we would never experience the hardships of a world that has rebelled against God. Tribulation increases faith. God allows us to go through the tribulation, while protecting His people from His judgment upon the world. While the serpent's false gospel tells us that we need to rise above our circumstances and achieve a better life, Christ's Gospel is one of sanctification in the midst of our circumstances in this world.

Does God cause specific tribulations in our lives? Most of the time the answer is no. We live in a time of tribulation that has been enabled by God for a purpose, but God does not cause most specific tribulations that we go through. We have to know, when we talk about tribulation in this world, that not everything happens for a reason, but God can use everything for a purpose; and He does for those who belong to Him.

### **The fifth seal**

Now that we have taken a broad look at all of the seals, I want to examine one of the seals more closely.

When the fifth seal is broken, we see the martyrs (here meaning those who have been killed because of their faith in Christ) crying out from under the altar to God, “How long will this go on?” How long would God allow the suffering of His people? How long would the seven churches continue to be persecuted? How long must the people on the earth who follow Christ endure the great tribulation that they now experience? How long will families continue to be torn apart? How long will drug problems persist? How long will we (people on the earth, not the martyrs under the altar) experience famine, hunger, sickness, death, and martyrdom? How long will God wait before He finally raises His people up and issues His judgment against the people on the earth who have denied Him?

God's answer is simple, and I am not sure how satisfying it is for us now. Perhaps this is one of the reasons many who profess to be Christians have turned to the serpent's treacherous gospel. We want to hear that Christ is coming tomorrow, or tonight, to make all things right and to end

suffering for His people; but this is not what we see in the text. God does not reveal for us a day or an hour. Instead, He answers, telling the martyrs to wait a little while longer until the number of martyrs is complete. Not only does God say, “Not yet,” but He also states that more people must be murdered for His name's sake. There must be more tribulation experienced by God's people on this earth. Thanks, God, for not giving us the answer that we want to hear! We want to know how to escape tribulation and You have told us that we must continue to endure it! Here we see a difference between the serpent's false gospel, which is filled with false promises of glory, and the Gospel of our Lord, which continues to call us to sacrifice rather than to entertainment or personal gain.

This answer required faith and trust on the part of the churches in Asia. It requires faith and trust on our part today. When will the trial end? We do not know, and so we have to trust God with the timing. If God has all knowledge and all wisdom, and if God is all-good, then we can trust and have faith that His timing is perfect. We can be willing to endure these things for His name's sake and for the sake of our own sanctification.

Think of the current hardship or tribulation in your own life. For us it is usually not the constant threat of

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imprisonment or martyrdom like it was for the churches in John's time and like it is for many churches in other parts of the world today. Perhaps it is financial trouble. God, how long must we endure before You make things right? Perhaps it is problems at work because we live in an imperfect world. Perhaps there are relationship problems that cause tribulation. Perhaps our faith in Christ draws us to take stands that are unpopular in our day, causing tribulation for us. Perhaps there is sickness that plagues our families or us. Maybe we have lost loved ones and people keep dying around us. Perhaps we have entered into a stage in life and we don't know how to adapt, causing tribulation. Here is the encouragement that John gave to the churches: Whatever tribulation we experience now and no matter how severe it may seem to us, God will use that tribulation to make us more holy. There will be a time when God will make all things right, and we can trust completely in His timing.

### **Another encouragement for the church**

In all of this, we might wonder what kind of existence those who go before us have. Is there a soul sleep? Do our loved ones live in the eternal bliss of heaven without us? Is there some sort of intermediate state for them? Surely these

questions were also on the minds of the churches to whom John wrote. Surely they also wondered where those who had been murdered because of the faith were at or what they were doing. While we cannot answer this question fully based on this passage of Scripture, we do receive a clue. The spirits of the martyrs were under this altar taking part in this heavenly ceremony where Christ is breaking the seals, preparing to pronounce judgment. In Revelation 7:9-17, we see the multitude of genuine Christ-followers who are coming out of the tribulation that John is describing for our current age. They are also before God, serving Him day and night and God is also shepherding them and wiping the tears from their eyes.

There will come a day when there is a new heaven and new earth, but while Christ is carrying out His work of grace in the current age, those who pass on before us are taking part in that work along with us. Only, now they are in the full presence of Christ, serving God day and night. There doesn't seem to be any indication of a soul sleep. They do seem to currently exist in spirit without a body (this body will be made new and returned to them eventually).<sup>4</sup> Our loved ones also do not seem to be in the eternal bliss of heaven that we usually

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5



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might picture, yet. They are serving Christ as Christ accomplishes His current work from the heavenly realm. This, ultimately, is better than the other two options. It means that they may be aware of the events on the earth. Our loved ones may be able to see the work that we are doing for Christ and we honor them as we honor Christ. This is a great encouragement for us and for the seven churches during John's time.

It also means that we ought to be very careful of books and movies like *Heaven is for Real* and *The Shack*. They, just as most books or movies written about either Heaven or Hell or some other spiritual experience, present pictures of Heaven, of Hell and of God that are entirely un-biblical or even contrary to the descriptions we find in Scripture. They present pictures of God that draw us in to (Can you guess it?) the false gospel of the serpent: everything in heaven is human centered and this is how you get there! The message of heaven, as it is described in most places today, will convince those listening to dive head-first into the pit of Hell. Considering this, though, I am so glad that most descriptions are wrong. I would much rather know that my loved one is with Christ, participating in Christ's work, and serving Christ than think that he or she is somewhere off by him or herself frolicking through the

heavenly tulips doing something that causes him or her to be out of Christ's presence. I am so thankful that God has given us some details in the text of Scripture so that we can measure every claim according to a standard that God has given us.

If there are some who like these books or movies, great! We simply need to be careful not to develop our theology from works of fiction. In fact, we shouldn't rely on them whatsoever to reveal anything about God or about spiritual experiences. We have the text of scripture.

In our current age, there is tribulation for God's people. Tribulation serves two purposes: to warn those who have not given their lives to Christ and to sanctify or purify those who have. If you do not know Christ, my hope is that the warnings serve to bring you to Him. If, for some reason, you have believed in the serpent's gospel rather than the Gospel of Christ, it is time for repentance. Christ is the only one who has authority to judge and He is preparing to judge the whole world. I hope that you will not wait until it is too late. For those of us who have given our lives genuinely to Christ, my hope is that we are open to Christ's sanctifying work in our lives. That we become better rather than bitter. The reality is, if we don't see the fruit of sanctification in our own lives as a result of the tribulation we experience, we should question

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whether or not we have actually trusted in Christ. If we have, God uses the tribulation in our lives to draw us into a deeper holiness. God's people do not endure tribulation in vain.

Furthermore, sanctification cannot be something that we achieve. That is the serpent's sermon. It is something that has to be achieved in us by God's Holy Spirit. Sanctification is the effect of salvation and not the cause. It is not something that we can will or that we can possibly bring about in ourselves.

So, preachers, please stop preaching that it is our work by which we grow closer with God. This, again, is the serpent's gospel. God's grace is such that all of those who are saved do grow closer with God as a result of what God has done. Sanctification is the outworking of the faith. If we are not being sanctified, then we have not received the faith from the faith giver.

# Chapter five

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## **Being Humbled, not Hiding**

As we continue, we find ourselves in the part of the story where Christ is breaking the seals, preparing to declare judgment upon the world. He is the only one who is worthy because He is the only one who suffered the death penalty on our behalf. The seven trumpets are described as being part of the seventh seal, and with the seventh seal comes more severe preliminary judgments (more severe than those that come with the breaking of the first six seals). Since the seventh seal is the blasting of the seven trumpets, we can know that these trumpets serve the same purpose that the seals do: warning for those who do not know Christ and sanctification for those who do. There is one major difference, though, according to Revelation 7. Before the seventh seal is broken, the people of Israel (here to mean true Israel, not national or new Israel) will receive God's seal of protection. There may still be hurt in the

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world, but God's people will be protected from His direct, more severe preliminary judgments.

This time will be a time when God's coming is imminent and the people of the earth will know that Christ is King and He is coming to restore His creation. There will be plagues on the earth that are reminiscent of the plagues in the land of Egypt. Pharaoh recognized God because of the plagues, but the people of Israel were protected from them. People will recognize God as these plagues are unleashed upon the world. What I fear, is that like Pharaoh, people will have hard hearts toward God and, in pride, will refuse to repent and turn to God. I fear that in our day, human pride causes us to ignore God in favor of our own convictions or our own priorities.

What place does pride have in our lives? How does our pridefulness keep us from God? Is there pride in the world that causes many to deny Christ? Might there even be a pride in the church that causes God's people to be ineffective in the work of the Gospel? Is it pride that causes so many local churches to profess the gospel of the serpent rather than the gospel of Christ?

After the six plagues described in chapters 8 and 9 within the breaking of the seventh seal, we might expect that

the people of the earth respond by turning to God, but John makes an entirely different observation:

The rest of the people, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands to stop worshiping demons and idols of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which are not able to see, hear, or walk. And they did not repent of their murders, their sorceries, their sexual immorality, or their thefts (Revelation 9:20-21).

### **Pride and worship in the world today**

As John is writing to the seven churches, there is a whole lot going on culturally. The Roman Empire was diverse and perhaps as diverse as the United States is today. This cultural diversity brought with it moral diversity. Religion was encouraged and the state religion required emperor worship. Those who refused to worship the emperor were declared to be atheists and the law was brought against them. I find it interesting, here, that Christians at the time were designated as atheists by the Roman Empire. Temples were erected for emperors and sexual promiscuity became the norm. The morality of Rome was naturalistic, depended on human philosophy (particularly the Epicureans and the Stoics), and centered around the person. Some women were fighting to be

considered not only equal but superior, parents had the authority to kill their children or let them live, modesty was absent, and sexuality was corrupt.<sup>5</sup> This is what human pride led to and what we see human pride leading our own culture to in this world. Furthermore, I want to point out that the pride of Rome led to worship. The things that we have pride in lead to the things that we worship. Worship led to moral standard. We shape our moral standard after the things that we worship.

Here, I want to explain something that is very important for us to realize. The serpent's gospel has been professed since Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit. Pride, the driving force of the serpent's gospel, is not a new thing. Sexual immorality is not a new thing. Promiscuity is not a new thing. Human centered morality is not a new thing. Superiority movements are not a new thing. What John states as he describes the blasting of the trumpets is not that it is the church's responsibility to condemn people for their pride and for what their pride has led them into. No, he specifically describes preliminary judgment coming from God to warn prideful people that He is about to judge the whole world.

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<sup>5</sup> Jackson, James. "Ready, Session 5 (Ready When Homosexuality Devastates): Morality in First Century Rome." Bible Studies For Life. 2015.

Still, even though God is the one convicting and warning people of their own pridefulness, there will be many people on the earth who will not repent, or admit that they are wrong in their pridefulness and turn to Christ.

In our culture today, I see the same sort of trends that were present in first-century Rome. There is a high level of sexual immorality. In fact, as a culture we worship the god of sexuality. We place the things that we want or desire before our honoring God's design. This is pride, and we celebrate it. As a culture, we worship our politicians and our leaders, thinking that somehow they hold the keys to victory when they do not. This is pride leading us to ask what our leaders can do for us. We worship the gods of entertainment, intoxication, power, fame and money. This is pride. We see this tendency even in our text above. The people had pride in self and in the Emperor. Pride caused them to worship idols and idol worship led them into false morality. Thus, we arrive at this truth: pride leads to worship leads to moral conviction. If we have pride in self, then we will worship our own pleasure and our own happiness. If we worship these, then our morality will be based on convictions that lead to our own happiness and pleasure. If we have pride in someone else, then our moral conviction will reflect that pride and worship. If we



have pride in our material possessions, our moral convictions will revolve around how we can get more stuff and protect the stuff we have. If, however, our pride is in God, this creates a humility of self. Our worship is directed toward God, and our moral convictions reflect what honors God instead of how we might gain materially or emotionally or hedonistically for ourselves.

### **The contrast with God's holiness**

When I was little, I did something (I do not remember what it was) that required an apology. My mom asked me to apologize and I would not. Pride. My mom started counting, and we all know what that means. It means that there was some sort of punishment coming after the numeration was finished. My mom did not count backwards from 3 or 5. She started at 1 and began counting up. Each new number represented how many spankings I would receive. I would not apologize. My mom got up in the twenties and still I would not apologize for whatever it was that I did. I received more than twenty swats that day. My pride kept me from apologizing as a child. In the same way, our pride keeps us from repenting before the holy God of the universe. According to the text above, pride will keep people from repenting even

when God's judgment is imminent. In this text, it is because they saw something as morally acceptable when God did not.

I want to approach this subject with as much grace and love as possible, but there is something we have to know: God's moral standard does not depend on human philosophy or human emotion. God's moral standard is wrapped up in one thing and one thing alone: His own nature. This means that correct morality does not change and that it must be considered according to a word that God has provided and according to God's design, not our own. There are things in the world today that are seen as morally correct by society but are wrong according to God's moral standard. Again, whatever our pride, it leads to worship and then to moral conviction.

If God created all things, then it is His standard according to which we must try and live if we want to be moral people. Our pride, though, causes us to do a few things:

1. It can cause us to mask our sin. We want to do a certain thing or act a certain way so we find ways to justify what we do. We might say things like, "I was born this way," or "God would not have created me this way if it wasn't okay with Him." The reality is that we are all creatures living in a fallen condition where we do not perfectly resemble God's created order. God did not

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make us the way that we are regarding our sinfulness, the fallen condition of the world did.

2. It can cause us to project our sin. Instead of looking at ourselves in a mirror and overcoming the difficulty to notice the sin that we have in our own lives, we project our sinfulness onto others and point out their sins so that we can ignore our own. I witness this a lot with homosexuality today. The church projects all of its energy onto people who struggle with this sexual sin and, in the process, fails to look at its own sin. We must make no mistake, homosexuality is a sin. If that is the sin that you struggle with, know that every other person also has a sin that they struggle with. When we point our finger, our pride causes us to be ignorant of the sin in our own lives. This is true: every person must deny his or her own desires to follow Christ. For some reason we limit self-denial to a small group so that we don't have to feel guilty about our own sin. This is pride, which causes us to project.
3. It can cause us to reject God. Most atheists that I get to talk to say that they are atheists because evidence points to a naturalistic world. As I talk to them, I realize that most of the time they choose to reject God

because they want to live in a manner that is immoral according to God. This is not a consequence of the atheist alone. Many religious people, though they claim God, have rejected God and only belong to a certain faith because it offers them something that they want. Do we see how this represents the movement of the serpent's gospel even in many of our churches? Here, I make another realization: becoming a Christian because we want to live forever or because we want to avoid Hell (hear the 'how-to'?) is a selfish christianity where people only want to gain for themselves rather than submit to the holy God of the universe. To trust in Christ in order to escape Hell is false salvation because it stems from a false gospel: that of the serpent. To trust in Christ in order to experience eternal bliss brings so many into a false salvation. This is why John, the author of Revelation, defines eternal life as knowing God (John 17:3), and not as heavenly bliss.

As I think about my own salvation, then, I have to notice something important. I came to faith in Christ because I realized that I needed Christ in order to live in a way that mattered. My reason for beginning to follow Christ was

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selfish. I made the decision in my own pride. I wasn't simply submitting to the king. I had some idea about what Christ would do for me. I have a feeling that we are all like this.

It takes a lot for me to admit this. I was not saved because of the words that I prayed or because I saw that I could benefit from Christ. I am saved because Christ chose to save me. My salvation did not depend on me at all. After I received Christ, Christ began to increase my humility and bring me to a place where I realized that my salvation was not for me, but for God. It is true that we benefit from knowing God. I am saved, not for the purpose of my own benefit, but for God's glory.

This idea is reflected in the text above. If God Himself will warn people and they still will not turn to Him, then there must be a sense in which God calls a people for Himself according to His foreknowledge and predestines them to be conformed to the likeness of Christ (Romans 8:29). While we may start the relationship that we have with God selfishly, God conforms those He foreknew to the image of His Son, and begins removing their own pridefulness for His own glory. If we maintain our own pride, then, it may be the case that we do not belong to God. It may be the case, if our christianity does not humble us and drive us to change, that we have

embraced wholly the false gospel of the serpent.

If human pride is so powerful, it actually amazes me that anyone is able to come to God. Left to our own devices, we would all reject God outright in favor of a multitude of other options or in favor of a gospel that tells us how to be successful in any degree on this earth. In our pride, not one of us would come genuinely to God. We are completely and utterly depraved, and this is one of the most humbling truths to realize. It is God who draws us, God who saves us, God who sanctifies us, God who calls us and God who glorifies us. There is no other way. Thank God for His grace. Thank God that His message is not a message of how-to's for this life.

We must remember that our misplaced pride leads to idol worship leads to false morality. If I worship myself, if I worship money, if I worship power, riches, relationships, material possessions, or even pleasure; it will come out in my moral judgment. If in my moral judgment I am able to, by some miracle, deny myself, then I show my worship to God. This, though, is only possible with God. We get so surprised when people who don't belong to Christ act like sinners. Without God, people are unable to honor God. The only morality for godless people is a godless morality. This should not surprise us and should certainly help us to show more

understanding as we engage people who do not belong to Christ. Sinners will act like sinners and will come to Christ in their prideful condition. It is Christ who does the work of salvation and of sanctification in all of our lives.

### **A call to humility**

As we consider human pride, especially in the church, I do not want to say that every Christian who has some pride issues has experienced a false salvation. Some have, but some have not. It may be the case that we have been saved by God, yet in our fallen condition return to our pridefulness. After all, God does not depend on us. We must repent and turn back to God. Pride leads to ignorance, to sin against God, and ultimately to our own destruction. There will come a day when human pride causes people to receive the judgments of God and ultimately be separated from God forever. A temporary time of happiness and pleasure on this earth is not worth eternal damnation. For those who have not given authority over their lives to Christ, it is time to, in humility, repent and turn to Christ. In giving our lives to Christ, we cannot do so for the selfish reason of escaping Hell or making it into the bliss of heaven. Christ is not a fire-insurance policy, He is Lord. The ultimate act of humility for us is this: that we would

actually admit that we are wrong, give our lives to Christ and trust Him with the rest. When I gave my life to Christ, it was out of selfishness and Christ quickly showed me that it was not about me. He emptied me of me and saved me for His glory. If there were no rewards it would be worth it, but God still promises us an eternal existence in His glory. Romans 10:9 states that if we believe in our hearts that Christ was raised from the dead and confess with our mouths that He is Lord, we will be saved. That is the promise given in Scripture.

For those of us who do know Christ, human pride is something that we must stand against, and we must do it in a manner that itself is not prideful. We seek to understand others. We humbly practice forgiveness. We don't have to have our way. We examine the sin in our own lives and strive to overcome it. In those moments when I realize that there are still traces of pride left in me, I am so thankful that God does not depend on us. To assume that God depends on our ability to overcome pride is itself prideful. We tend to think much too highly of ourselves. The truth is that Christ has saved us, Christ has made us a kingdom of priests, and Christ will raise us up. For me to think that I have much to do with it at all is another act of pride. The only thing I did was receive God's grace and submit to His authority. What else can we do?



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Nothing else is worthwhile. Nothing else satisfies. Nothing else causes us to overcome ourselves. Christ is the only one who has the words of eternal life. Where else can we go? In our pride, God calls us to repentance so that He can deliver us for His glory and take pride in us. It is a miracle that anyone is able to come to God. He is so good, even as He warns of the coming judgment. It kills me to know that even when God warns people, people still reject Him and refuse to repent. We must struggle against our own pride, which is a constant battle for us on this earth throughout every stage of life and in every arena of life.

I might even state this: It is the human tendency toward personal pride that draws us to the serpent's false gospel, which tells us we can. It is humility that enables us to accept Christ's Gospel, which admits for us that we cannot.

# Chapter six

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## **Testifying, not Tucking Away**

As we move on, I want to caution us again about trying to put together a timeline of events. This was not John's purpose for writing and if we try to do this today, we will be more confused than enlightened. Though John's Revelation seems to follow a basic path of chronology (first the seals, then the trumpets, then the bowls, then God's completion of His own redemptive work), there are interludes where John's description is panchronistic and in which he describes various timeframes with one vision. We saw one in chapter 7, when the saints of the earth were sealed and when the multitude coming out of the tribulations on this earth were comforted by God as they served Him. This did not happen all at once, but as the events described in the seals unfold throughout time. We arrive at another interlude in John's revelation (chapters 11-12). These are panchronistic and possibly overlap both the trumpets and the pouring out of the bowls of God's wrath.

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While John's purpose is not to establish chronology, it is to offer hope to a church in persecution. When the entire world denies Christ and turns its back on God, what is the place of God's people? What is the church to be now, in the current tribulations of the world, and as Christ comes closer to declaring Judgment upon the earth? With what kind of attitude are we to live in a world where the false gospel of the serpent is so profound? What are we to do and how are we to go about pursuing the work of the Gospel in an age when people have little regard for God and little interest in the church? There is the question again. "How?" here to mean, "With what attitude?" and not "What is the step-by-step process by which we can accomplish righteousness?" How do we accomplish righteousness? We cannot. With what attitude should we seek to honor Christ who, in His own power, has already saved us? Perhaps this is a valid question. After all, our attitude is a response to Christ's sanctifying work in our lives, not a cause of that work. So I might ask again, what are we to do and with what attitude are we to go about pursuing the work of the Gospel in an age when people have little regard for God and little interest in the church, as we live in response to Christ's redemptive work in our lives?

Then I was given a measuring reed like a rod, with these words: “Go and measure God’s sanctuary and the altar, and count those who worship there. But exclude the courtyard outside the sanctuary. Don’t measure it, because it is given to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for 42 months. I will empower my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, dressed in sackcloth.” These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. If anyone wants to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and consumes their enemies; if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this way. These men have the power to close up the sky so that it does not rain during the days of their prophecy. They also have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every plague whenever they want.

When they finish their testimony, the beast that comes up out of the abyss will make war with them, conquer them, and kill them. Their dead bodies will lie in the public square of the great city, which prophetically is called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. And representatives from the peoples, tribes, languages, and nations will view their bodies for three and a half days and not permit their bodies to be put into a tomb. Those who live on the earth will gloat over them and celebrate and send gifts to one another because these two prophets brought judgment to those who live on the earth.

But after 3 1/2 days, the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet. So great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, “Come up

here.” They went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies watched them. At that moment a violent earthquake took place, a tenth of the city fell, and 7,000 people were killed in the earthquake. The survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe has passed. Take note: The third woe is coming quickly (Revelation 11:1-14)!

### **Who are the two witnesses?**

This portion of the text presents some interpretive difficulties. The particular question is asked, “Who will the two witnesses be?” The ancient scholastics would be proud! There are many scholars who believe that the two witnesses will be Elijah and Moses and a case can be made for that, but the case is based largely on speculation. There is a more natural and basic reading of the text. Throughout John’s revelation, the church has been described as a lamp stand and the oil by which the lamps burn has represented the Holy Spirit. If we read this text in the context of the rest of the book, then the two witnesses would be the church because they are also described as lamp stands empowered by the oil from olive trees (the Holy Spirit). There is also the fact that in verse 4, God states that when the time comes, He will grant His authority to His witnesses. There is no mention of God sending special witnesses, but instead using the witnesses that

He already has present on the earth. There are two witnesses depicted because that is what was required by the Law in order for anyone to bring an indictment against another person (Deuteronomy 19:15). It could also represent the two-fold church (true Israel) consisting of Jewish believers in Jesus and Gentile believers in Jesus on the earth during this time.

### **Role of the witnesses**

As John writes to the churches in persecution, there is a very clear message that the church will receive from this part of his vision: the world is corrupt, is blind to God, and therefore needs witnesses to call the world to repentance. In verses 5-7, John describes the awesome power that will be given to God's people during this time specifically for the purpose of testifying in this courtroom setting against the kingdoms of the world.

I sometimes think about what life would be like if I had super powers. The super power that I would choose for myself would be telekinesis so that I wouldn't have to actually walk to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I guess it would be cool to be able to breathe fire, stop the rain, turn water into blood or cast any plague upon the earth as often as I desire; but those aren't really abilities that I think of. Throwing

locusts at my enemy doesn't really strike me as being that attractive. The point of the church receiving this authority from God, though, will not be so that it can be attractive. It will be so that, in the age of judgment, the church can deliver her testimony as part of God's indictment against the world.<sup>6</sup>

The world will hate the church and will even make martyrs out of the people of the church. This is what we saw God looking forward to in Revelation 6:9-11, when he told the martyrs coming out of the current tribulation that He was waiting until the number of His people who were going to be murdered was completed before He set things right and judged the whole world.

Just as this served to encourage the seven churches as witnesses to God, it also serves to encourage us as we live in the current age. The seven churches did not have the authority of God to inflict plagues upon the earth and neither do we. John has already encouraged the church to represent Christ even to those persecuting them. We have already learned that

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<sup>6</sup> Interesting, here, is that the plagues of the witnesses are described in a parallel fashion with the bowls of God's wrath and end with a great earthquake just as the bowls end with an earthquake. I will not at this time draw this out to make any proposition, but I did want to point out the parallels. God's people, with God, though will be issuing testimony against the kingdoms of the earth.

this is something that we need to be doing without condemnation because we do not sit as judge, Christ does. He is the only one who has authority to condemn. The authority given to the church in these verses will not be authority to condemn, but authority over the natural elements, specifically as the Holy Spirit directs. We know, then, that we need to be witnesses and that the church will always be a witness to people who have not yet repented and turned to God. What precisely does it mean, though, for us to be a witness in our current age?

First of all, it does not mean that we have the right to condemn. We are in the business of lovingly calling people to repentance for their own sake. Second, the whole of the church is represented in the two witnesses. This means that the giving of testimony is the work of the whole church and not only certain individuals.

Third, the prerogative of God's people cannot be entertainment. Music in the church must, first and foremost, be testimony to God. When we either accept or condemn music based on the style or the talent of the musicians, we are guilty of pleasing ourselves rather than God, and of perpetrating the how-to gospel of the serpent. When we try to draw people in using primarily entertaining music rather than



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the testimony that God has given the church, then we are guilty of pleasing other people rather than God. We are, again, guilty of declaring the message of the serpent's false gospel. All of the sudden, people become the primary focus of the church. While we do need to strive to meet people's needs, the primary focus of the church needs to be God and the delivery of the testimony that God has given to the church. The same goes for every other aspect of the church meeting. We are not to be concerned with our own entertainment or the entertainment of others. Through all things, the testimony that God has given the church is to be delivered in its fullness as we fellowship, as the message is delivered in whatever manner it is delivered, and as we find our place of service and plug in.

Fourth, we share the testimony that God has given us with the expectation that most people will refuse the testimony and hate the people of God because of that testimony. The work of a church after God's own heart is simple: to deliver its testimony without reservation and without condemnation. The responsibility of the church is not to change in order that it might look like society. We do not want to look like the world. While there are practical things that we can do to better get the message of the Gospel into our community and world, we are not to try and force the church organization to look like the

world. We are to give the testimony of God in a way that the testimony is heard and clearly understood.

Here is what this means: We don't have to worry about people liking us. We are to strive for a good reputation and live at peace with everyone as much as it depends on us (Romans 12:18). If people choose not to like us because we deliver the testimony of a living and loving God, it is not counted against us. If church numbers do not skyrocket but we have been faithful to deliver God's testimony (rather than making games and entertainment the centerpiece of our meeting), then we are blessed by God as His witnesses. The church is to be a witness. If the church (God's people) is not a witness, then it does not perform the function of the church in the current age.

In fact, I might even be bold enough to make this claim. Any church or ministry that uses music, games, or the personality of an individual to draw people in is a church of the serpent, not of Christ. My deepest prayer is that churches displaying the name of Christ are not, instead, synagogues of Satan. We must be careful that, as we strive to serve our Lord with what we do, we do not shift our attention to those things at the expense of Christ's Gospel. If ever my blog was restricted and my books burned; If ever my sermons were

protested and removed from public view (like those of Charles Spurgeon once were); If ever people left my church because they didn't like the music or our youth group did not grow because another has better games; I pray that I would still be content and that my work for the Gospel would be made of the substance of Christ. Christ was beaten to death because of His testimony. In light of that, let me never compromise Christ's Gospel for a better worldly reputation or for more followers.

### **Character of the witnesses**

When these witnesses (you know, the ones in the passage above) are depicted by people in the world, they are usually depicted with fierceness, especially in the popular *Left Behind* series. They are depicted with no mercy. They are described as cold-hearted wrath bringers who will utterly destroy anyone who approaches them (other than Kirk Cameron).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, as we read the text of Scripture, these witnesses (most likely representing the church itself) are dressed in sackcloth. In John's time, sackcloth was worn during periods of mourning and weeping. In Luke 19, we even see this in Jesus as He looked on the unrighteousness of the

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<sup>7</sup> Or Nicholas Cage?

Jews in Jerusalem. Jesus wept because of the consequences of their sin before going into the Temple and sternly correcting that sin. This is a great indication of God's character. God weeps bitterly because people will have to suffer the consequences of their sin. God wants to save sinners but does not do so without their repentance. God loves people so much that He actually weeps over unrepentant hearts. As God's witnesses, we should not lord our morality over people as we give the testimony of God and draw people to repentance. Quite the opposite. If we have truly given ourselves to Christ, unrepentance in the world ought to cause us to weep because there are people who, because of their unrepentance, will suffer the consequences of their sin. We should not desire that anyone have to suffer such an eternal fate.

We ought to love others so much that we weep on their behalf, not condemning them but calling them to repentance before holy God. We need to come to a place where sinfulness, both in our own hearts and in the world, breaks us and brings us to our knees weeping for those who have not believed in Christ. A Christian witness is not pompous or condemning like some who call themselves followers of Christ are. We must love people so much that we weep on their behalf.

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There is this false conception about church out there that presumes we are part of an organizational church body to have our happiness and our pleasure served or that we are in a church building to hear good music or to have great events. The fact of the matter is that we are not here together for us at all. We are here for Christ. We live to be witnesses of Christ. While the rest of the world seeks entertainment, happiness, pleasure, and worldly success, we are called to love so deeply that it draws us to tears for the brokenness of the world.

So, the witnesses used their superpowers as they wept for the people. This gives some great insight for us as we live. When we punish children, we should do so as we weep: punishing to make them better, not out of our own anger. The same is true as we address employees. The same is true with church discipline. The same is true in our ministries. The same is true as we engage politics in our day. The same is true even in our recreation. We interact with the world as God does: with great mercy and with genuine concern for the well-being of every person, especially as it regards eternity.

### **Power of the witnesses**

As we might notice, the two witnesses in this passage of Scripture are not operating on their own power. There are

two olive trees that are providing the oil by which the lamp stands (which are the witnesses) burn. If the witnesses are representative of the church, then the olive trees are representative of the Holy Spirit. We cannot be witnesses without the Holy Spirit enabling us to be so. We cannot communicate the testimony of God in a way that is meaningful and impactful without both the leadership and the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. We cannot have a church service in which the testimony of God is paramount without each member following the direction of the Holy Spirit. I am under the impression today that the Holy Spirit is still working with great power. Perhaps this does not look like many today claim it looks, but John, here, would not have included the symbol of the olive trees if we, God's witnesses, could be good witnesses without the empowering and the gifting of the Holy Spirit.

I am living proof of this. I am certainly more introverted than many people. Being around people just makes me tired. I have to be by myself to rest and regain energy so that I can be around people for the purpose of the Gospel. Me introducing myself to someone new or calling someone on the phone is exhausting for me. It is exhausting for me when people are around me all of the time. It is so ironic that God

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has called me into the position that He has called me into. I prove every day, though, that in my weakness God's strength shines through. I prove every day the need for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit in all of our lives.

Introvertedness is not an excuse that we can use so that we don't have to share the Gospel. Praise the Lord that as witnesses we are directed and empowered by the Holy Spirit within us! I can no longer hold myself down and we no longer have an excuse. We have the Holy Spirit! This stands in stark contrast to the gospel of the serpent, which says, "Follow these steps and only work according to the strengths you already have." The reality is, friends, we can't. Because we could never follow Christ on our own, the Holy Spirit empowers us to do all things in Christ. We have no excuse.

I wonder what this means as we meet together. If the Holy Spirit is the one leading us and empowering us in our singing, then we have no excuse when it comes to offering ourselves to God in song. We can clap and we can lift holy hands before the Lord! If the Holy Spirit is the one leading us and empowering us as we engage God's Word together, then our limitations do not keep us from gleaning something. When the Spirit moves as His testimony is given from the Word, we are free in the Spirit to give a loud amen! Just be ready, when

you say amen, your preacher gets more excited because then he knows the Spirit is moving in your heart. When we make our engagement known, it may even inspire someone else to open their heart and mind to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. We all contribute as witnesses when we engage the Word together in worship. The power of the church's witness depends only on the church's submission to the direction and enabling of the Holy Spirit.

### **Conclusion**

So, the church is to be a witness. She is to share the testimony that has been given to her by Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. She is to weep for the unrepentant hearts of those in the world and to love sinners so much that she is drawn to tears. Let us live in such a way as this. Let us be good witnesses for our God and Father no matter our age, no matter our stage of life, and no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in, in this life. Let us not give in to the false gospel that is presented in the world today. Our primary responsibility is to serve as a witness in this great courtroom.



# Chapter seven

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## **Being Preserved, not Persevering Ourselves**

Often times, we speak of perseverance in terms of the runner. The runner will go the distance and finish the race well by the work of denying his own exhaustion. The perseverance of the Christian is similar, correct?

Here, I would like to pose a simple question. If we compare Christian perseverance in the faith to that of a runner, do we insinuate that the Christian's faith depends on his own power to have faith or to go the distance? Do we not promote a works-based system, which is contrary to the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ? Is this not the very idea that the serpent presented to Adam and Eve in the Garden?

Christian perseverance is going to prove to be more awesome and powerful than we could ever imagine. If perseverance is not something that we can achieve on our own, then our following Christ becomes much more simple than we might cause ourselves to think. This is my question at this juncture in our time together: Is it necessary for us to gain

more faith by our works or persevere by our own strength; or are faith and perseverance things that are given to us as people of God?

Then I looked, and there on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with Him were 144,000 who had His name and His Father's name written on their foreheads. I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of cascading waters and like the rumbling of loud thunder. The sound I heard was also like harpists playing on their harps. They sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders, but no one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. These are the ones not defiled with women, for they have kept their virginity. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. They were redeemed from the human race as the firstfruits for God and the Lamb. No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless (Revelation 14:1-5).

### **Identity of the saints**

As we have been reading through the book of Revelation together, we have seen that there are few people on the earth who genuinely repent and give the authority over their lives to Christ. In Revelation 7, we notice that there are believers on the earth who will be sealed with God's ownership and protection as the seven trumpets, with which

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come intense plagues to announce the return of King Jesus, are being prepared. After the trumpets, and in our text for today, we see Christ standing with these believers in a vision prior to that of the bowls of God's wrath being poured over the earth. These believers are representative of those in the seven churches to whom John is writing, and are the ones who have endured the great persecution. They have had great perseverance in a time of great trial.

144,000 is a finite number and very small in light of the population of the earth, even in John's day. This is to mean simply that there were few who persevered under the headship of Christ. There were few on the earth who were part of the true church or true Israel.

Furthermore, there is the name of Christ and of the Father written on their foreheads. This is in direct contrast to the mark of the beast mentioned in chapter 13. These are people who, despite all of the false promises that the kingdoms of the world had for them, gave themselves to Christ. Even in light of the serpent's false gospel, this true church had submitted to the authority of Christ. In fact, Christ was the one who was preeminent in their lives, and the serpent's false gospel had not prevailed in their minds or hearts.

In the world today, I find that there is the same sort of contrast. There are people who live for the world (those who live according to the serpent's gospel are included here) and there are people who have given their lives to Christ. There can be no in-between. The world is concerned with riches, comfort, material possessions, pleasure, entertainment and fitting in. The true church is different. Consequently, the true church will not be content with entertainment (either by music, games, or style of preaching) as a means to draw people in. This means many youth groups and young adult classes across our country operate in a way that is contradictory to the text of Scripture: which indicates that a church body is not a biblical congregation. Constantly throughout Scripture we are challenged to give up our wealth and take on Christ. We are challenged to give up our comfort so that we might participate in the work of the Gospel. We are encouraged to live simply so that we do not have to spend on ourselves or take for ourselves. God's people often give up their own happiness or satisfaction in order to serve others in need. Instead of concerning ourselves with always being entertained, we take the constant position of a servant so that we might honor Christ. Even at the cost of losing the affection

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or the acceptance of others, we follow Christ because He has given us life.

There is a very clear difference between the kingdoms of the world and the kingdom of Christ. Here is the sad reality, though: there are even so many within the organizational church who look like the world instead of like Christ. As a result, there are many local churches that, instead of being churches, are social clubs that look and feel more worldly than like Christ. This is something for us to grieve about. Many of our churches today are more concerned with worldly attraction than they are about actually denying self and living for our Lord. Many people, both in the church and out, are more concerned with pursuing the things of the world than they are the things of Christ. There are few people who actually persevere in the way of genuine Christian faith.

When we were in Revelation 9, we discovered that the people of the earth are prideful (that is all of us!). Despite our pride, Christ meets us where we are and saves us. This is grace! In this grace, Christ justifies all those who are willing and makes them a kingdom of priests (as we saw in Revelation 1). In John chapter 17, the author of Revelation states that this eternal life that Christ alone gives is knowing God. This idea is represented in our current text as well!

## **Knowledge of the saints**

As the saints in this passage stand with Christ, they begin singing this new song before God's throne (v. 3). It is a song that only the saints know or can learn. This reveals something very important about the knowledge that God's saints have. When Christ justifies a person, that person actually comes to know God, whereas God could not be known by him or her before Christ's work of salvation. Something in us changes when we submit the authority of our lives to Christ. Before, we did not know God, and now we do.

There has been a differentiation made here between general knowledge about God and saving knowledge of God. We have often referred to this as the difference between head knowledge and heart knowledge. There is a difference between knowing something about the God of the universe and actually knowing the God of the universe. Before Christ saves us, the only knowledge we can possibly have is head knowledge or knowledge about God.

Some people assume, then, that head knowledge about God is knowing God. It is assumed, for some reason, that because we grew up in church, went to Sunday School, learned that disobeying our parents and having sex before

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marriage was wrong that we have achieved salvation. The truth is that this could not be further from the truth.

One of the greatest dangers in our world is that we substitute knowledge about God in the place of actually knowing God. I can know more about God by the power of my own facilities. I can study, know the Bible, teach a class, know how to look like a Christian, and know the right answers. If I believe that those things save me, then I am gravely mistaken. There is no way, by any work I can do, that I can ever be saved. Only Christ can do this. Only Christ can bring us into a relational knowledge of God, and knowledge that John actually uses to define eternal life.

The saints, here, who knew God, sang to God a new song that only they could learn. With our lives on this earth, we sing a new life-song that only those who have been redeemed by Christ can learn. There is a difference for those who live according to the world and those who have been saved by Christ.

What I notice, here, is that Christ saves and then begins to transform our hearts and our minds. It is this transformation, this sanctification, that leads us to a more robust understanding of our own perseverance.

## **Perseverance of the saints**

As we think about perseverance, I might point out an ironic tendency within the world today. Most people will tell us that perseverance is a good quality for anyone to have. Yet, most people do not persevere in the most important things: marriage, family, work, and friendship. We don't even persevere in something like church. We don't want to admit that we are more concerned with our entertainment and we want to say that we are committed to our church family, but we've all seen people leave for trivial reasons. When I was growing up and in the youth group, we had great music and a fun game every Wednesday! We had more than 100 teenagers all meeting together. We sang to our Lord and heard a lesson from the Bible. Yet, most of the people that were in church with me growing up are no longer in church, and many who 'got saved' have now rejected Christ later in their lives. Why is this?

The reality is that there is and has been two different gospels being proclaimed from the pulpit of the evangelical church. The most prominent gospel is a how-to gospel, the same gospel communicated by the serpent in the Garden. The how-to gospel is the gospel that I heard in youth group every Wednesday and it attracts so many people. Within the context



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of this gospel, we hear messages like: “How to have a great marriage!” “How to honor your parents!” “How to date according to Scripture!” “How to grow a church!” “How to be saved!” “How to get closer to God!”

While Scripture does have some practical input for us on these issues, these are not the emphases of Scripture. Scripture’s aim is not to teach us how to be successful on our own power in this life. The true Gospel is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which says, “You can’t do it. Only Christ can raise you up and lead you well. You must give your life to Him.”

The reason so many millennials, that’s my generation, have run from the church is not because the church failed to be cool enough or because the church failed to cater to a new culture. It is because so many churches were preaching a false Gospel to my generation: a gospel of how-to’s instead of the Gospel of Christ. Perseverance was seen as something that we had to do rather than something we received.

What I notice in this text of Scripture is that Christ saved, Christ gave relational knowledge of God, and everyone who received this salvation is standing with Christ when all is said and done. These are the ones, according to John, who did not commit idolatry, who follow Jesus genuinely, who were redeemed for God, and who were blameless before God. This

is the Gospel, and it is not a gospel of how-to's. It is a Gospel of 'you can't,' so surrender to Christ because He is the only one who can.

Considering this, I might mention a couple other passages of Scripture. Romans 38:38-39 states that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. Romans 8:29 states that those whom God foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ. All those whom Christ saves are also sanctified before God. Nothing at all can separate us from God's love. Here in revelation, we get to see this idea play out. None of those who were saved chose to walk away or fell away from Christ's salvation and sanctification.

Here, we arrive at a truth that may be very difficult for us to deal with. If it is the case that all those whom Christ saves persevere (if God's grace is unlimited), then it must be the case that there is no backslidden Christian. It means that those who had a good head-knowledge of God and a strong will, who once looked like good Christians and 'fell away' have never had Christ as their Lord. I have friends who fall into this category and sometimes we use terms like 'backslidden' (which is not an idea represented in the New Testament church at all) that keep us from realizing the dire

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circumstances many of our childhood friends are in. Perhaps this describes the circumstance of a loved one. This might hurt us to hear and I do not say this lightly. Barring any mental trauma or disease (I think God's grace covers over these), those who 'backslide' or choose to walk away from the faith were never in the salvation of God. There are many "good people," church goers, mentors, teachers, deacons, elders and even pastors who have a head knowledge, but who have not been saved by Christ. As a result, many of our heroes fall from the faith, and many people who claim to follow Jesus are not participants in the community of faith.

God's grace is so great that He brings about perseverance in our lives; not a selfish perseverance, but a perseverance toward Himself. For those of us who do genuinely know Christ, we know what this is. We would never think of leaving Him and we can't think of our lives outside of the context of the community of faith. It does not mean that we never doubt. Our doubt reveals God's grace because He brings us through that doubt. It does not mean that we will never make a mistake. What it means is that God's people will persevere despite every doubt and despite every mistake. Our perseverance is not something that we are called to on our own power. It is Christ who preserves us and calls us to

perseverance because it is something that He provides to those He saves.

We expend so much of our energy on how-to's falsely believing that we must, in our own ability, persevere. Often we make the mistake of calling others to this type of perseverance. We say things like, "You just need to have enough faith!" "Just don't doubt God!" We use all of our energy trying to do the right thing to please God and to stay in His good graces. I have news for us. We are already in God's good grace. Those who have been saved are also preserved by God. Our simple task is surrender. Nothing else, just surrender. We tend to make the faith way more complicated than Christ does. Perseverance comes as a result of Christ's preservation. It is evidence of our salvation and our sanctification (which are ideas that cannot be separated from each other).

## **Conclusion**

The calling, here, is not perseverance. The calling is surrender, which is where we must begin if we want Christ to preserve us and if we want to persevere to the end. It is true that in Christ we have a greater ability to persevere in our marriages, in our vocations, in our commitments, in our churches and in our moral strivings; but this is not the point of

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the Gospel. We must remember that it is not a how-to even though it can be applied to life. The Gospel is simple. We cannot, Christ can. So, we surrender.

For those we know who once looked like Christians on the outside but never truly surrendered, we pray for them daily. We do everything that we can to perform the work of God's witness in their lives. We lovingly call them to repentance. We share Christ's Gospel through any avenue of communication that we possibly can. For those of us who have genuinely surrendered to Christ, He will preserve us through any and all tribulation. This is the revelation that John received from God. This is the perseverance of the genuine Christian.

# Chapter eight

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## **Sacrifice, not Prosperity**

Considering what has been learned from Scripture up to this point, we can be more confident in Christ because of the victory that He has won. Because of Christ's victory, we can all have victory in Him. This is the message that the true gospel presents us with. The message is so clear and so simple, if we are in Christ, we get to experience victory over death. Our sins are forgiven and Christ gives us the eternal life that belongs to those who are in Him. This is the good news of the true Gospel! There is nothing we can do to cross from death to life, but Christ offers to carry us. There is a popular illustration that shows the cross bridging the gap for us so that we can cross over into eternal life. I want to make this clear, Christ is not a bridge. He is the one who must carry us if we ever want the hope of salvation. This is the message of Christ's resurrection.

This message has another side, and it is never a side that we like to talk about. It is the side concerning the

serpent's gospel, which has presented itself in so many of our churches and in the world at large. So many often skip over it in the text of Scripture. We must, though, recognize this truth: If life is found in Christ, the only thing that we can find anywhere else is death. This includes the serpent's gospel. In the previous chapter we discovered what it is to know God and to be preserved by Christ. What about all those who look to something other than Christ for their success, their salvation, or their satisfaction? What about those who have given themselves to the false gospel of 'how-to's' that we have been addressing together throughout this book? If Christ wins the victory, what is to become of the kingdoms of this world that are saturated with the serpent's gospel?

After this I saw another angel with great authority coming down from heaven, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. He cried in a mighty voice:

It has fallen,  
Babylon the Great has fallen!  
She has become a dwelling for demons,  
a haunt for every unclean spirit,  
a haunt for every unclean bird,  
and a haunt for every unclean and despicable  
beast.

For all the nations have drunk  
the wine of her sexual immorality,  
which brings wrath.

The kings of the earth

have committed sexual immorality with her,  
and the merchants of the earth  
have grown wealthy from her excessive luxury.  
Then I heard another voice from heaven:  
Come out of her, My people,  
so that you will not share in her sins  
or receive any of her plagues.  
For her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes.  
Pay her back the way she also paid,  
and double it according to her works.  
In the cup in which she mixed,  
mix a double portion for her.  
As much as she glorified herself and lived  
luxuriously,  
give her that much torment and grief,  
for she says in her heart,  
“I sit as a queen;  
I am not a widow,  
and I will never see grief”  
For this reason her plagues will come in one  
day —  
death and grief and famine.  
She will be burned up with fire,  
because the Lord God who judges her is  
mighty.  
The kings of the earth who have committed  
sexual immorality and lived luxuriously with her will  
weep and mourn over her when they see the smoke of  
her burning (Revelation 18:1-9).

### **Nature of the world**

When I served in Oklahoma City, I met a pastor who drove a really nice Camaro. He wore a nice watch and always wore a nice suit. His shoes were always shiny. He looked like an old-school evangelist. I don't know what he preached or



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how his congregation felt about his luxurious living, but I do know that it made me very cautious when he was present. My thought was this: we have students in our church whose families cannot afford food, yet this man who claims to serve God in the same community has spent his money so that he can enjoy luxury.

Luxury. Luxury is kind-of a funny word for the Christian. What I am not going to say is that people who claim to be God's people and who experience great luxury are not saved because that is not what Scripture claims. I do, though, find it interesting that here, when John describes the kingdoms of the world (Babylon), he describes them as kingdoms of great luxury. His description is that the luxury of Babylon causes the kings of the world (those who are stewarding the world: humanity) to commit idolatry against God.

We see the same concern for luxury in the lives of the religious people at the point of Christ's resurrection. In Matthew 28:11-15, in response to Christ's body being absent from the tomb, some of the Jewish religious leaders bribed the Roman soldiers to tell a lie so that people would not think that Jesus actually rose from the grave. What they were concerned about could be described with one simple term: luxury.

Luxury describes our culture and our society today. We live in a land full of luxuries, and even the poorest of us has more than most people in the world. As of 2015, most people in the world live on less than \$10 per day.<sup>8</sup> That is less than \$300 per month and less than \$3,600 per year. In the United States, most families live on more than \$53,000 per year.<sup>9</sup> Those in poverty in the United States live on more than \$20,000 on average. We live in a land of luxury compared to the rest of the world. We are so blessed.

Here is what makes the sin of Babylon so detrimental and so serious: the kings of the world commit idolatry with the luxuries of this world. We see John describe it here in Revelation and we see it in the religious leaders' response to Jesus' resurrection. They wanted to keep their pride. They wanted to keep their positions. They were concerned with the luxury of authority. They gave into the temptation of committing idolatry with the luxuries of the world.

Now, we might observe the world we live in, and this is probably going to hurt us just a little bit because our

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<sup>8</sup> Luhby, Tammy. "71% of the world's population lives on less than \$10 a day." CNNMoney. 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Luhby, Tammy. "Typical American family earned \$53,657 last year." CNNMoney. 2015.

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luxuries are great. During part of my childhood, my dad (my biological father) provided so well for us. He owned a business. We had a nice house on some land in a rural area. Life was good and we had much because my dad worked hard. My mom and my biological dad are no longer together. I never knew my dad well because he was always working. He cared so much about the luxuries of the world that, though his children had much, they did not have him.

Our pursuing the luxuries of the world can cause us to neglect family. More importantly, our attention is diverted from God when we focus on worldly luxury. Because I want to stay up late and sleep in, I forsake participation in Christ with the local church. Because I feel it is so important to provide physically for my family, I neglect providing for them spiritually. When my attention is even on the smallest luxury in this world, my attention is not on our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. By trying to gain for myself, I lose my very soul.

For those of us who are guilty of pursuing any degree of luxury rather than wholly surrendering to King Jesus, there is good news. The world, for luxury's sake, put Jesus to death. Jesus, for our sake, overcame death!

## **Nature of Christ's resurrection**

Jesus operated in complete contradiction to worldly luxury. It simply was not something that He was concerned with even in the slightest degree. I think the apostle Paul sums it up nicely in Philippians 2:5-11:

Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus,  
who, existing in the form of God,  
did not consider equality with God  
as something to be used for His own advantage.  
Instead He emptied Himself  
by assuming the form of a slave,  
taking on the likeness of men.  
And when He had come as a man  
in His external form,  
He humbled Himself by becoming obedient  
to the point of death —  
even to death on a cross.  
For this reason God highly exalted Him  
and gave Him the name  
that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee will bow —  
of those who are 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 (HCSB).

Jesus did not have a vocation; He did not have even a place to lay His head (Luke 9:58, Matthew 8:20). He was homeless and had been forsaken by the world. Yet, He was

content. The King of the universe, on whom all people must depend, humbled Himself. There was no luxury. There was no promise of worldly luxury for those who followed Him. In fact it was quite the opposite. In Matthew 19, when we read of the rich young ruler, we learn that the rich young ruler was good according to the religious standards of the world. Jesus said that he lacked one thing: he must sell all of his possessions and give the money to the poor. Then he could have eternal life.

We often will hear that luxury is not a sin, that we should pursue our own comfort, that we are blessed if we have material wealth, that earning lots of money is a good thing, and so we pursue luxury. The pursuit of worldly luxury, according to Christ, is in direct contradiction to having Christ as Lord. Christ sought to give of Himself, yet we have the audacity to claim to follow Christ and still work for personal gain. I thank God for His grace, because if He did not choose to love us in spite of our insufficiencies, our love for luxury would surely kill us. This is yet another area where many local church have given in to the false gospel. How many nice buildings have been built when money could have been better used to share the gospel? How many church budgets revolve

around the comfort of members rather than the work of evangelism?

So I find that if anyone unashamedly pursues luxury, it is evidence that he or she does not know Christ at all. If anyone knows Christ, he or she is humbled by Christ through sanctification and places the worldly pursuit of luxury aside more and more with time. Christ's resurrection draws His people to not gain for themselves, but to give to others in the context of the community of faith.

### **Nature of those in Christ**

When Christ brings us to a place, then, when we are more willing to give up the luxuries of this world, then we are being prepared to have a place in His resurrection. Christ gave Himself. When we give ourselves, we are like Christ. Christ won victory, and when we are conformed to Christ's image, we also win the victory! With this being said, I ask this question: will you deny the luxuries of the world (which will fall in the end) so that you can participate in Christ's resurrection? For some of us, it means working less so that we might see Christ. For some, it means giving up some sleep in order that we might participate in the community of faith. Christ calls us to simple living; not so that we can benefit

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mentally or materially (this would be the message of the serpent), but so that our lives might be lived for His glory. When we do receive material blessings, those blessings are wasted if they are not used for Christ's name's sake. He is King and He was raised to prove that! If all we do is celebrate Christ's resurrection on one holiday, then we do not celebrate Christ's resurrection at all. We celebrate every day as we deny ourselves and live for Christ in light of what He has done on the cross!

# Chapter nine

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## **Heavenly Rewards, not Earthly Gain**

When I was little, it was such a sacrifice for me to clean my room. I was so busy all of the time. I had school. I had to play video games. I had to practice machine pitch in the evenings. My mom made me go to church. I had to eat dinner. There was no time for me to clean my room. When I did, it was one of the greatest acts of sacrifice that I could think of. My mom should have been so proud. She should have rewarded me for cleaning my room! Right. What reward is given when people only do what's expected?

In the previous chapters, we've discovered that the Christian life is one of sacrifice. Christ calls us, in opposition to the world's luxury, to a life of giving up what we have so that we can concern ourselves with serving Him well on this earth. There eventually comes a point when we ask, "Is it worth it?" The serpent's gospel just seems much more appealing if we are to be honest. There is a promise that we can actually earn something for ourselves. Is it worth rejecting



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the serpent's gospel in favor of Christ's, which calls us to give up everything? Is it worth giving up everything we have so that we can serve God? Is it worth seeking nothing for ourselves so that we can partake in the mission that Christ has given us?

After God's judgement is poured out on the earth, we see Christ establish a physical kingdom on this earth before He makes all things new. We hear this referred to as the millennial kingdom or the thousand-year kingdom. It is here, in the book of revelation, that we get to read of God's generosity. It is here that we see God is not only a God that calls His people to sacrifice on this earth, but that He also rewards His people generously even though we do not deserve any reward that God would give.

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven with the key to the abyss and a great chain in his hand. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for 1,000 years. He threw him into the abyss, closed it, and put a seal on it so that he would no longer deceive the nations until the 1,000 years were completed. After that, he must be released for a short time.

Then I saw thrones, and people seated on them who were given authority to judge. I also saw the people who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of God's word, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and

who had not accepted the mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with the Messiah for 1,000 years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the 1,000 years were completed. This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of the Messiah, and they will reign with Him for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:1-6)

### **Rewards for faithfulness**

Looking at this text of Scripture, it is easy to wonder what the 1,000 year reign of Christ on this earth will be like, and we receive some clues in other areas of Scripture (particularly according to the prophet Isaiah). This portion of the text actually gives us very little information about the 1,000 year reign. If we remember, the churches John is writing to are in the midst of persecution. They are seeing their friends and family members placed in prison and sometimes even murdered because of the faith they have in Christ. John gets to this place in the book of Revelation where he finally has the opportunity to offer relief to the people of God. He has called us to endurance, and he has called us to a lifestyle of personal sacrifice. Now, finally, he proclaims the goodness and generosity that God has for His people.

We saw the martyrs that are mentioned in this text before as we've been walking through Christ's revelation to

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John. We saw them in chapter 6, as they cried out to God from under the altar, “God, when will You vindicate us? How long will you wait?” In chapters 7 and 11, we witnessed believers being murdered because of their faith and because of the testimony of Jesus Christ. After God’s judgment is declared over the earth, this will end. All of those before us, in our current age, and who come after us that give up their lives for the sake of Christ’s testimony will receive the great honor of reigning with Christ for 1,000 years before Christ restores everything else. In this text, it is referred to as the first

resurrection. Anyone who has not given up his or her very life will wait for the second resurrection.<sup>10</sup>

In this, I find a truth that every Christ-follower needs to understand: God rewards those who are faithful to Him. Faithfulness doesn't just mean that we acknowledge Christ, it

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<sup>10</sup> A popular interpretation suggests that the second resurrection is a resurrection of the dead for the purpose of judgment, but I am not convinced because it doesn't seem to fit the natural reading of the book of Revelation. The first resurrection seems to precede the forming of the New heaven and New earth, at which time the New Jerusalem (representative of Christ's bride or the church) will be finally and eternally restored.

Acts 24:15- Refers to the resurrection of the just and the unjust. In context, the "just" seems to refer to those under ritual law (i.e. the Jews) and the "unjust" seems to refer to those not under ritual law (i.e. the gentiles). This makes sense regarding the nature of the book of Acts.

John 5:29- Refers to a resurrection of life and a resurrection of judgment. Jesus was playing on the expectations of the religious Jews who expected, by their work, to become participants in the resurrection. Essentially Jesus' message was, "You'll receive a resurrection alright; a resurrection of judgment because your works are evil!" This was not a description of the second death (John's description in Revelation 20), but an accusation of ritualism (evil works) amongst the religious teachers of the day.

There seems to be a second resurrection and a second death, not to be confused with one another. Resurrection is a bringing into life, the first resurrection on the current earth (experienced specifically by martyrs) and the second resurrection on the New earth. Death is a loss of life, the first death on the current earth and the second death for eternity. Throughout the New Testament, the resurrection is always mentioned in contrast to death, not to describe a type of death.

means we actually deny ourselves in order to serve Christ, to live in the context of a local body of believers, to practice evangelism, and to make disciples. Faithfulness to Christ necessarily means sacrifice of self. Of course, here I mean sacrifice metaphorically: it is the setting aside of my own desires, dreams, pursuits, and strivings so that I might use the gifts that God has given me to serve Him rather than myself. The martyrs we read about, here, were faithful to the point of death and are rewarded for that faithfulness.<sup>11</sup>

### **Rewards for sacrificial living**

The rewards that God gives, and we see it clearly in the above text of Scripture, are not given for no reason. God rewards specifically according to the sacrifices that His people make in this world for the sake of Christ's testimony.

Somehow we have gotten to this place where we assume that good Christ-followers earn some sort of payment or reward on this earth. We serve God, so we expect to remain in good health. We built a church, so we expect that God will give us what we think to be a good life. We reserve as much time as

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<sup>11</sup> Not everyone is called to give up their life physically to the point of martyrdom for the sake of the Gospel, which is why I believe this specific reward does not last forever, but merely 1,000 years.

we can for ourselves, so that we can pursue our own hobbies or so that we can “have a life.” I am a little bit of a workaholic. I actually have to guard against working too hard. Every once in a while I work so much that I don’t really “have a life,” and I’m sure I’m not the only one. Sometimes, though, we get so concerned with having a life for ourselves that we miss Christ; and to think that our Lord rewards us according to how much we are willing to sacrifice or give up for His name’s sake.

Here, I might just list some things that we have: time, money, reputation, dreams, desires, hobbies, material possessions, jobs, friends, families, comfort, status, platform or position. Don’t get too scared at this point; remember that faithfulness comes before sacrifice. Any sacrifice that is made and is not done in faithfulness is made in vain. Not all people are called to get rid of all of these things for the sake of the work of the Gospel. Faithfulness means willingness to give up anything that would serve to do the work of the Gospel in this world. If giving up a job or a paycheck would help us to do the work of the Gospel, would we be willing? If giving up material possessions would help us to deliver the testimony of Christ better, would we be willing? The message here is not, “You must give up everything!” The question, here, is a

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question of willingness. If by giving something up we would become better witnesses, would we give it up?

This is the basis by which God rewards His people.

When we get an opportunity to give something up for the sake of the Gospel, God's rewards are great! Jesus even spoke concerning those rewards in Mark 10:

"I assure you," Jesus said, "there is no one who has left house, brothers or sisters, mother or father, children, or fields because of Me and the gospel, who will not receive 100 times more, now at this time — houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions — and eternal life in the age to come. But many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Mark 10:29-31).

There is an irony here. The purpose for which we make sacrifices cannot be to gain a heavenly reward. The mention of rewards is to encourage those who make sacrifices and wonder if those sacrifices are worth it. Our motivation can only be service to Christ and the work of the true Gospel. There is not this heavenly environment where all of God's people are on equal ground. All are equal in worth, but not necessarily in status or level of reward. God loves all of His people equally, but will give some more than He gives others. We read it here and it came from Christ's own lips: Those who make greater sacrifices for Christ and for the sake of the Gospel will be first

in the age to come. If we seek to gain in this age for ourselves, then we will be last in the age to come. All of God's people will receive rewards, and these rewards are given according to the level of sacrifice specifically for Christ and for the Gospel.

What if someone has more and is therefore capable of sacrificing more? If sacrifice begins with faithfulness, then God measures our sacrifice proportionally to what He has made us stewards of. If a poor man is more willing to give up what he has been given for the sake of the Gospel and a rich man is less willing but gives up more quantitatively, it seems to me that the poor man still receives a greater reward. When it comes to sacrifices that are made, it seems that God will measure the quality of the sacrifice rather than the quantity and will reward accordingly. We see this even with Cain and Abel, as Abel offered a pure sacrifice and Cain did not (Genesis 4). The woman at the temple gave all she had even though it was less quantitatively than others gave, and Christ said she gave more (Mark 12:43-44): "For they all gave out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she possessed — all she had to live on." God is concerned with quality, not quantity.

Do we want to know what kind of sacrifice is pleasing to God? God is pleased more when we give out of our poverty



rather than when we only give out of our surplus, and this applies to more than just financial giving. Those who do give out of their poverty receive a greater reward in the age to come.

### **Rewards from God alone**

If there were no rewards, it would still be worth living under the lordship of Jesus Christ. After all, He does give eternal life. Eternal life is given to everyone who genuinely believes in Christ and the rewards we are talking about go above and beyond that. These rewards are given or withheld at God's own discretion. What we have learned is that God is just in His punishment and He is generous in His rewards: giving us much more than we could ever hope to deserve. This we know because we don't even deserve eternal life, yet God rewards those who serve Him even beyond giving only eternal life.

If God gives these rewards at His own discretion, I discover another irony: There is no way that we can earn the rewards that God has for us. What I mean here is that we cannot possibly perform work on this earth that is near the worth of the reward that God will gift to us. Not only can we never out-give God, but we can never match the gifts that God

has for us. God is generous to His people. For this reason, all of the rewards we will get that actually matter come only from God and are not things that we have earned for ourselves on this earth. The serpent's gospel, though it sounds promising, would lead us to believe otherwise. Its promises will never come to fruition. They are vain pursuits.

This means that in Christ, I am called to steward well the position of Pastor according to the responsibilities given in God's Word. It means as people who earn a paycheck, we are called to be good stewards knowing full well that it is God who has allowed us to earn a paycheck to be used for His purposes. If we have time, energy, property, possessions, relationships, and even knowledge; God has called us to steward those things for His kingdom and not our own. When we use the gifts of God to build kingdoms for ourselves, Christ actually states that we have received our rewards on this earth in place of those God might have reserved for us in the eternal age (Matthew 6:2). The apostle, Paul, even warned the local church as he wrote to the believers in Corinth:

What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? They are servants through whom you believed, and each has the role the Lord has given. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,

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but only God who gives the growth. Now the one planting and the one watering are one in purpose, and each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's coworkers. You are God's field, God's building. According to God's grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. But each one must be careful how he builds on it. For no one can lay any other foundation than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on that foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, each one's work will become obvious, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire; the fire will test the quality of each one's work. If anyone's work that he has built survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, it will be lost, but he will be saved; yet it will be like an escape through fire (1 Corinthians 3:5-15).

We should not use the Gospel as a platform to build our own kingdoms. In this, an interesting question arises. What if God has given us a platform or resources but we do not serve God in order to build our own kingdoms? What if, for instance, God has blessed someone with lots of money and he is faithful to give for the purpose of the Gospel? God's gift on this earth is for the purpose of the Gospel through that person. He has not used the Gospel for personal gain, but personal gain for the Gospel. The same is true with a pastor who receives recognition or a platform. He is not to use the Gospel for personal gain, but personal gain (as a gift from

God) for the purpose of the true Gospel. Thus, I find we can ask this question as we think about sacrificial living: Have I used the gifts that God has given to gain for myself or have I used them for the work of the Gospel? If it is the case that I have not used them for the work of the Gospel or have held on to something at the expense of the work of the Gospel, then I have built something that will one day burn away and I forfeit the reward that God may have had reserved for me in the coming age. Some are called to sell all of their possessions for the sake of the Gospel, all are called to use their possessions for the sake of the Gospel. Some are called to give up their income for the sake of the Gospel, all are called to use their income for the sake of the Gospel. Some are called to give up their home for the sake of the Gospel, all are called to use their homes for the sake of the Gospel. Some are called to give up their lives for the sake of the Gospel, all are called to use their lives for the sake of the Gospel.

When we ask, then, what does it mean to live in such a way that we are concerned with pleasing God rather than people (or ourselves), this is what the question begs of us. Will we live for the generous eternal reward of God, or will we live for a mediocre temporary reward on this earth? Yes, it is absolutely worth giving up everything in order to be a good

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witness for Christ on this earth! Yes, it is worth rejecting the false promises of the serpent's false gospel.

# Chapter ten

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## **Letting Go, not Holding On**

As people, we are so stubborn. I could share story after story of people in my life whom I would consider to be stubborn (and, indeed, we probably all thought of someone), but here I really want to focus on our relationship with our Lord. We believe, for instance, that God wants to do a great work in us, yet we do not want to change as He does that work. We desire that things get better, but we refuse to let go of that which holds us back. We understand that, in some cases, things need to be different as long as they don't require us to be different. We say with our mouths that we want to honor God, yet we declare with our actions that we only desire to hold on to what was or is. Sometimes our mouths confess Christ's gospel while our actions promote the false gospel of the serpent.

Here, I want to pose a simple question as we conclude our current study of the book of Revelation: If we are called to surrender and sacrifice, and if God is constantly doing this

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sanctifying work within us, should there ever be a time when we are trying to hold on to what is or was? Should we ever come to a place where we have become complacent in the faith that we share in Christ?

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea no longer existed. I also saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband.

Then I heard a loud voice from the throne:

Look! God's dwelling is with humanity,  
and He will live with them.

They will be His people,  
and God Himself will be with them  
and be their God.

He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Death will no longer exist;  
grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer,  
because the previous things have passed away.

Then the One seated on the throne said, "Look! I am making everything new." He also said, "Write, because these words are faithful and true." And He said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give water as a gift to the thirsty from the spring of life. The victor will inherit these things, and I will be his God, and he will be My son. But the cowards, unbelievers, vile, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars — their share will be in the lake that burns

with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:1-8).

### **The old earth passes away**

As we think about this specific passage of Scripture, I would like for us to think about it in the context of trends we see on this earth. In John’s day (remember he is the human author of Revelation), there was great persecution. There is still great persecution today. People in the world do suffer because of their faith. When someone disagrees with someone else, there is a type of persecution as one person, or both, try to assert their dominance (just as with Adam and Eve, this is evidence that the false gospel has been accepted). Some in this world try to force others into doing certain things or even into doing those things a certain way. There is persecution in the world today. This may even carry over into the organizational church when we care so much about our way of doing things or about our preferences that we end up persecuting someone who doesn’t agree with us. In this world, people are in the circumstance of sinfulness and this sinfulness drives us to assert our own dominance and our own preference and it causes us to look down on others who may not agree with us.



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Second, sin abounds. Even in this passage, John shares that those who still live by their sin will not even have a place on the new earth. Consequently, this includes those who live according to the gospel of the serpent. Their share will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

Third, people in this world experience distress. Whether it is because of persecution or because we are sometimes wrong or because we try so hard to have our own way that it just stresses us out when our expectations are not met.

As John is describing what will take place at the inception of the New Earth, he describes that the old earth will pass away. No more will there be persecutors! No more will sin be a bother to God's people! No longer will there be distress! No longer will the false gospel of the serpent prevail! In fact, John goes on to describe that the sea will also no longer exist!

Okay, I'm not sure that the non-existence of the sea is causing us to jump for joy like it may have the church in John's day. Because of persecution and the testimony of Christ, John had been exiled to an island. This island was separated from the mainland by miles of water. John is

separated from the churches to whom he is writing by the Aegean Sea (the same sea that Odysseus wrestled to get home in Homer's *Odyssey*). If John is writing that there will be no more sea, he is telling his friends, brothers and sisters in the faith, that there will no longer be anything whatsoever that can separate them.

The things of this earth: grief, crying, pain, dominance, persecution, distress, the serpent's gospel and even separation will all pass away!

If God will do away with all of these things, I have to wonder why we, in our stubbornness, try to hold on to them as we strive to follow Christ. Why is it that we desire to become more like Christ, but we hold on to ourselves? Why do we desire to love others but speak in condemnation about them or to them? Why do we desire for God to do a great work in our midst, yet hold on to the way that *we* think things ought to be done? Why do we say that Christ is sufficient, and still look for something more to please us (music style, a preacher, a topic, a husband or wife, children, a job, a ministry, food, money, possessions)? Why do we say that God's Word is our authority, yet live and operate by other devices (preference, by-laws, human rules, tradition, zodiac signs, worldly advice)? If God is the one who will do away with all of the things of the

current earth, might it be that to follow any other way than the way that God has given would be to invest in things that will one day perish?

If a church, for instance, chose to operate according to its own by-laws or tradition rather than according to Scripture, and with every decision, the church referenced its own by-laws rather than looking to the text of Scripture for guidance, it could be the case that the church is investing in the ways of the world rather than in the ways of God.<sup>12</sup> If a youth group or a children's ministry drew in students or children by playing games and the true Gospel was secondary, it would be the case that the ministry is investing in the ways of the world and the serpent's gospel rather than in the ways of God. If fathers exacerbate anger in their children rather than raising them up like a shepherd would guide his sheep, it is the case that they are investing in the ways of the world rather than in the ways of God. If we do anything according to ourselves instead of according to our Father in Heaven, we have invested in the ways of the world.

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<sup>12</sup> In the case of church by-laws, they are necessary for an organization in light of the civil law of the United States. The by-laws of a church, though, should only reflect the Biblical mandate for the local church: nothing more and nothing less. A church should never be so attached to its by-laws that it is unwilling to change them in light of Scripture.

If the ways of the world (the ways of the serpent's false gospel) bring grief, crying, pain, dominance, persecution, distress, and even separation; then they are not things that I want to invest in! God is the only one who has promised to, one day, do away with these things. There will come a day when this old earth, and everything on this earth that we have invested so much in, passes away.

### **The new earth is established**

In this moment, God will establish a new earth and a new way of existence. No longer will we bring grief and pain upon ourselves by acting selfishly, but God will wipe every tear from our eyes and provide everything we need beginning with eternal life. This is a cause for great celebration and is also a challenge for us not to grow too connected with things the way they have been or the way they are. If God is making all things new, then it actually hurts us when we try to hang on. If we experience a high level of frustration when things begin changing, it may be evidence that we are not trusting our Lord and that, instead, we have bought into the serpent's gospel.

Everyone experiences a degree of frustration when new things begin happening because we have to figure out

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how to adapt. A high degree of frustration, though, comes when we try to fight to keep things the way that they are or the way that they have been. A higher level of frustration leads us to a higher tendency to look down on others or to lash out at others. We become more edgy and we end up, ourselves, being the cause of grief, pain, persecution, distress, and even the separation of God's people from one-another. This separation happens most prominently in our day ethnically and generationally. If there is a generational disconnect, it is our own fault. If there is an ethnic disconnect, it is also our fault, and it hurts us as the body of Christ in this world.

This is why so many people, in every age group and ethnicity, get stuck: We have idealized a certain part of our lives and we try desperately to hold on to it. When we do this, we move against God's work of making all things new. In our hearts, we reject God's sanctifying work in our lives. In the process we cause damage in our own lives and in the lives of those to whom we are connected. If, for some reason, we find ourselves saying something to the effect of, "We've always done things this way," or "I wish I could go back to this time in my life," then we are investing in the ways of the world rather than the ways of God. The ways of the world will pass

away, and the ways of God will be established forever and ever!

### **The new Jerusalem is adorned**

The coming down of the New Jerusalem out of heaven is my favorite part of this passage in Scripture. Jerusalem is described as a bride, who is adorned to be received by her husband. Jerusalem, here, is representative of the true church; for Christ's bride is not a material city but a kingdom of priests that He has built (Revelation 1:6). At this point, the church is adorned and she is brought before the God of the universe. He will dwell with us and we will be His people, His bride forevermore.

This sanctification that we talk about culminates in our glorification, when the accomplishment of our sanctification is celebrated and each one receives his or her reward from God Himself. When the ways of the world pass away and the earth is made new, the people of God will receive a new resurrection (or a second resurrection) and be adorned for God with the very glory of God forever.

For those who do not believe, who are not saved, who are not being sanctified by our Lord; they will also not be adorned or glorified. Those who belong to the serpent's false

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gospel, even if they are part of what they call a church, will not be adorned or glorified. For the cowardly, who do not profess the name of Christ; for the unbelieving, who trust in themselves; for the abominable; for the murderers, who take the lives of God's people; for the immoral, who have denied God's law; for the sorcerers, who trust in spiritual powers other than God; for the idolaters, who invest in the ways of the world rather than in the ways of God; and for all liars, who convince others of the world's ways (the ways promoted by the serpent's gospel); their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

In Revelation 22:17, we find a great invitation for those who are a part of the world and who invest in the ways of the world. "Both the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' Anyone who hears should say, 'Come!' And the one who is thirsty should come. Whoever desires should take the living water as a gift."

The Spirit of God invites all to partake in the gift of God. It is not a shallow gift that requires us to be anything special. It is not a step-by-step guide to receive a place in paradise. It is an invitation to receive a gift from God. Christ bride, the church, offers the same invitation. Anyone who hears this great invitation should also invite all others. This is

evangelism! Those who desire to take part in God's great gift of eternal life, anyone who desires to be with God forevermore, should accept this invitation and come. It is not about lights. It is not about games. It is not about entertainment. It is not about 'how-to's.' It is not about preference. It is not about human ideologies or traditions. It is not about ritual. It is not about church government. There is nothing that we can do. This is a gift, an invitation. Will we accept this invitation and come? Will we have a place with God and in the community of faith? Will we then worship God by devoting our time, energy and resources to inviting others and participating in the community of faith in a genuine way?



# *Chapter 11*

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## **Dear Christian**

Considering everything written before this, I yearn desperately to implore you as a brother or sister. There is a great movement in our world toward the serpent's gospel and there has been for a long time. Every day we witness 'churches' rising and falling. Everyday we see pastors who are leaving the ministry because they have failed morally or are burnt out in their current position. The false Gospel drives the christian to believe, think and act in ways that actually oppose the text of Scripture and, in so believing, thinking or acting, to live in blatant sin before God. Surprisingly, this tendency is so pervasive that I am inclined to think that most people who call themselves 'Christians' have never actually been brought under the saving authority of Christ. Don't stop reading, and please do not assume that I am picking on the average church-goer. Later I will also plead with both non-believers and church leadership; and church leadership (yes, including pastors) is included in this present category since we are all

members of our perspective local churches. Here, though, are some observations that I have made, not in any specific church, but in many local churches today.

### Clubhouse Mentality

The serpent urged Adam and Eve to gain for themselves at the cost of following God's direction. Adam and Eve then tried to achieve a sort-of godlikeness on their own. In many churches, members try to create the perfect atmosphere, accept the right kind of people, ignore or complain about the problems of the world, and expect that others will live in a way that they have approved before joining (or even attending) a church. We have for too long tried to make our churches look and feel like what we think heaven will be. As a result, we only accept people who look perfect. It is the sin of Adam and Eve. We have tried to achieve some sort of godlikeness on our own and in our churches.

The people in of the organizational church have done this in a variety of ways:

1. Many have looked down on others and condemned them for either their past mistakes or for their current habits. When we do this, we partake in the false

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gospel of the serpent, and communicate that it is not God who saves as a gift, but people who, by being good enough, have to earn a place in the church. It is a works-based mentality that has no place in a true church under the headship of Jesus Christ.

2. When other generations than our own are condemned, or even contended against, because of any generational difference, we have communicated the serpent's false gospel to those generations because we have worshipped our own preferences and/or methodology. If the Holy Spirit is working for the sanctification of all God's people, then we ought to see generations interacting in a way that will benefit those in other generations no matter what differences are perceived.
3. Many people in clubhouse churches have expected the pastor(s) to be agents of visitation rather than pastors. The pastors are hired to operate like nurses and forced to neglect the requirements that are given to the pastoral office in Scripture. This is a sure sign that church members are more concerned with gaining for themselves rather than giving themselves

to Christ. It is the sin of Adam and Eve and a lifestyle that falls in line with the serpent's false gospel.

There may be other things to add to this list, but these are the most prominent. Sadly, this is a category that belongs to many smaller churches. Many of these smaller churches say they want growth, but are unwilling to make the changes necessary to actually reach people with the Gospel.

### Bad Expectations

Many church members have expectations that are based on something other than Scripture. They are either based on preference, experience, or on the way that the church has been operated in the past (even if it is contrary to Scripture). As one example, Acts, chapter 6, tells us specifically two things. First, it is absolutely wrong for a pastor, elder, apostle, and overseer to perform any tasks that would cause him to neglect the ministry of the word. Yet, in churches world-wide, pastors are required or asked to perform tasks that cause them to be unprepared when performing the ministry of the word (preaching, teaching, evangelism, and sometimes biblical counseling). As a result, most churches serve bread crumbs when people are in desperate need of a spiritual meal. Second,

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no group in the church should be neglected. Yet, churches favor one group over another and fail to, according to the method described in Acts 6, select church members to serve the neglected groups so that their pastors do not have to live in sin during their time of service.

We wonder why so many pastors have to leave the ministry because of moral failure. We wonder why so many church leaders (90% of pastors) are burnt-out or exhausted. We wonder why a majority of pastors today have bad marriages (77%). We wonder why a majority of our leaders experience depression on a daily basis (71%). We wonder why only 23% of pastors actually feel content in their churches. Part of the reason is that many churches, by the anti-biblical expectations they set, force pastors and members alike to live in constant sin; and worse, to do so in the name of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

When these wrong expectations are set, we create for others a gospel of how-to's and place ourselves in God's place (figuratively speaking of course). In reality, it is God who gifts roles and responsibilities to His people. It is God who has given a guidebook as we strive to fulfill His calling in our

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<sup>13</sup> Statistics taken from <http://www.intothyword.org/apps/articles/?articleid=36562>

lives. We should not hold others, or ourselves, to our own expectations, but instead encourage one another to follow God's direction as God has given it.

Within this line of thinking, we might also imagine that when we expect others to act a certain way, we might need to check our expectations according to Scripture as we try to be understanding of others. Let us never drive anyone away because of the expectations that we have set without the direction that God has provided for us.

### General Selfishness

As church members contribute to the decisions of the church as a whole, there is usually a general selfishness. The question is asked, "How do I feel about this," or "How can we do what I think is best for the church?" As described in the previous chapters, this is the false gospel of the serpent playing out in our church ministry. Most churches that I have observed operate according to the standard of the serpent. As a result, the by-laws are worshipped, the church is reduced to simply trying to fill needs that it has at the current moment, and no investment is made for the sake of Christ's Gospel. It is time for the local church to stop being so self-centered. It is a

hindrance to the work of Christ's Gospel through that church. Any good pastor who cares about the work of the true Gospel will simply not be able to stay long at a church choosing to operate according to the serpent's "how-to."

Can we rise above this selfishness? The answer is simple. Stop asking, "What do we need," and begin asking, "What does God want us to do no matter the cost?" We stop asking, "How can we take care of ourselves," (this is Adam and Eve all over again in many churches today) and ask instead, "What decision requires us to practice faith in Christ?" Not easy, but simple. Until we begin operating like this, our churches and our ministries will not be blessed by God who challenges us to deny ourselves. In fact, it is not only a challenge, but a command in Scripture. If we do not deny ourselves, we cannot follow Christ. If we cannot follow Christ, we will not be with Christ in the end. Whoever would want to go with Christ must deny self (Luke 9:23).

As a pastor, I want to be entirely honest with you. The biggest problem that I have experienced in any church that I have been in is that at least some of the people are hearers of the Word and not doers. God's word is preached (either rightly or wrongly). The word is received. Then people live and the church is operated in direct contradiction to the instruction that

God has given, according, instead, to the false gospel of the serpent. This is what has been the greatest burnout for me at any church that I have been in where I have experienced burn-out. This alone has been the greatest discouragement for me. This, I believe, is the biggest reason churches are unable to keep good pastors: many of them operate in a way that is more of Satan than of the Christ that the pastor tries so desperately to follow and lead the church to follow.

### Spectator Mentality

One other way in which the serpent's gospel convinces those in church concerns church growth specifically. It seems that so many operate under the assumption that if we build it, people will come. What is this but a manifestation of the serpent's Gospel? Somehow today, many local churches have convinced themselves that just doing things a certain way or having the right personality (often a preacher or a music leader) will draw people in. Perhaps this is one of the greatest downfalls of the western church within the last one-hundred years. We expect sinners to come to us and be saved. Furthermore, we expect that inviting people who are not under the saving authority of Christ to a church meeting will produce fruit. This does not make much sense and is one of the main



contributors to local churches going into decline. We invite people to a church meeting without sharing the Gospel and inviting them to Christ. This is shallow and causes people to be more concerned with securing what they have built than actually working as a child of God. Because of this, outreach is often confused with in-reach, and evangelism is confused with sharing the products and services of an organization. This leads further to an unbiblical expectation that the pastors or ministry leaders will be the only ones who practice evangelism.

While I love Billy Graham and believe his heart to be pure in motivation, there is an illness that resulted from his crusades and many others that are or have been similar. This includes many church camps and Christian concert and evangelism tours in our day. Those who are wooed into a relationship with Christ, whether genuine or false, automatically have a spectator mentality regarding their own ministries or churches. Not only is this not practical, but it is unbiblical. Never in Scripture are we told to build and get people to come. We are, in opposition to this, told to go. Going to where sinful people are at and sharing the story of Christ is the primary method of evangelism.

If the Gospel of Christ states clearly that we cannot come to Christ on our own, then it must be our

understanding that others cannot either. If they cannot, why would they ever seek Christ on their own or step into a church on their own volition because they have been invited? They would not. We must go to them if we want them to receive the Gospel from us. Ironically, here, it means that the Christian, fearing he might ruin his witness, who avoids sinful places is avoiding the work of evangelism that God has called him to. The only way we can ruin our witness is by choosing not to be a witness in the most sinful places. Even Jesus Christ modeled this for us. To avoid helping sinners who might take advantage of us or to avoid places where sinners are is to buy in to the false gospel of the serpent, and this applies to pastors just as it applies to every other person who is in Christ. We must stop worrying about our image, and, instead, take the image of Christ to a sinful world that is in dire need of regeneration.

# *Chapter 12*

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## **Dear Seeker**

If you are not a believer or are currently not involved in a local church, you probably read the previous section and shouted, “Amen! This is why I want nothing to do with the church!” I want to, for a moment, consider the Gospel of Christ with you. The Gospel of Christ claims that people are entirely sinful and entirely insufficient. As people we are unable to sanctify ourselves and unable bring ourselves into salvation. Drawn out to its conclusion, this means that to judge a church based on any how-to or how-to-not is to be guilty of the same sin that much of the organizational church is guilty of.

There is a very important idea for us to realize. If Christ is the only one who can bring about salvation and sanctification, then it is only Christ who can bring about sanctification in any church body. To claim that we have given up on the local church for any reason is to buy into the false gospel of the serpent and completely reject the Gospel of

Christ; for the work of sanctification, either in an individual or in a local church, is not the work of the church, but the work of Christ. To forsake the local church, then, is to fail to have faith in Christ. To have faith in Christ is to understand that all people are sinful, that all churches are full of sinful people, and that it is Christ who is in the process of sanctifying every church body. This is a message for my own generation. We are so quick to point out insufficiencies and use those insufficiencies as an excuse not to be involved. This is the type of action that the serpent's gospel calls us to. We must turn away from this false gospel, and begin trusting in Christ.

For the unbeliever, I might simply make this statement. Please do not make a judgment call about God by observing the sinful people whom He has chosen to save. God is perfect and we are not. My desire is not for you to follow any person or just become part of a church. My desire is for you to submit to the lordship of a perfect God. If the false gospel of the serpent is ever communicated to you by anyone who refers to him or herself as a 'christian,' please politely ignore it and know that the work of both salvation and sanctification is the work of Christ. Only faith in Christ can save and sanctify the person, not faith in the works of the person or the church.

## *You Can't*

If you feel God drawing you to Himself, my advice is this. Open up the word that He has given. See how He has revealed Himself. See that in spite of any human imperfection, God still has grace and still actually chooses to save people to Himself. You don't have to be perfect. You can never prepare yourself for salvation or for participation in a local church. It is the work of Christ. The only requirement is that we respond to His invitation to come and believe Him. He does the work of salvation and He draws us closer to Himself.

# *Chapter 13*

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## **Dear Pastor**

I met a guy at the grocery store and when he found out that I pastor a church, he made this statement, “You don’t look or act like a pastor.” My first thought was, “Good!” I am aware of the irony, here, but I am a pastor and my opinion of the pastoral office is not that great. This is mainly because of the way most pastors I saw growing up presented themselves. When I think of a pastor, I think automatically of someone who thinks he is better than everyone else. I think of someone who dresses well in order to present himself as an authority. I think of someone who fights with his church and doesn’t consider himself as part of the body he has been charged to lead. I think of someone who is unwilling to serve. I think of someone who cares more about getting his own way than giving up his own way in order to declare and stand on the true Gospel alone. I am so glad that I don’t fit the “cookie-cutter” perception of a pastor.

## *You Can't*

The pastoral office has become something that it was never designed to be. The pastors in many churches become the object of a church's dependence, doing everything for the church. They have been the face of the church. When a church succeeds, it is the pastors who receive credit. When a church fails (however a group defines failure), it is the pastors who are blamed. Many pastors are expected to visit, preach, plan, strategize, implement, grow, reach-out, evangelize, encourage, counsel, study, pray, and be there for every church member at all times (impossible to do in only an eighty hour work-week). It sure seems like, in many churches, the pastor is expected to be god. This focus is not the fault of the average church member. While there are a few church members who have come to these over-burdensome expectations on their own, most church members have come to have this focus and these expectations because it has been reinforced over a period of years by church leadership. It is the fault of the pastor presenting himself as something that he does not have the right to be. The focus of the church was never to be the pastor. This is the outflowing of the serpent's gospel in today's church. The focus of the church is to be Christ and the very word of God.

2 Timothy 3:16 says this: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” There is no difference between the preacher and the teacher according to Scripture. God’s Word is to be taught and taught in such a way that it is profitable for the both the listener and the speaker. It is meant for correcting and for training. If there is no growth in the congregation, it is often the fault of the preacher for teaching by method rather than making sure that God’s Word is preeminent. The serpent’s gospel states that there is a certain way we ought to preach. Christ’s Gospel states that we preach God’s Word and trust Christ to accomplish His own sanctifying work in the life of the listener.

Furthermore, when the pastor gives in to unbiblical expectations, he verifies those expectations and perpetuates the serpent’s gospel. In this case, actions do speak louder than words. If unbiblical expectations are met by the pastor for years, then those unbiblical expectations begin to be seen as biblical expectations when they are not. This causes entire congregations to take their eyes off of Christ and place them on the pastor. The pastor is worshipped and any pastor who comes after him is held to a standard that contradicts the very



## *You Can't*

Gospel of Christ. As pastors, we ought to do everything we can, even though it is more difficult, to keep our congregations from depending on us so that they can depend on Christ. After all, this is why God has placed us in the church.

I see this pattern far too often. A pastor resigns or retires and the church suffers, declines, and experiences conflict. While it is not always the case, many times these things are evidence that a church body worshipped its pastor. The pastor did much of the ministerial work and did not take the time to equip the members of the church to carry out that ministry (see Ephesians 4:11-13). Pastor, I want to challenge you, here. Stop trying to do everything that everyone expects you to do. Fulfill the role that you've been given according to Scripture. Address unbiblical expectations in a loving manner. Equip the body to do the work as a body. Not only will we, as pastors, experience burnout when we try to do all things for all people, but we harm the church by perpetuating a gospel that was given by someone other than God. If we desire that our congregations depend on Christ, then we will have to humble ourselves, not giving in to the temptation to be Christ for them. God has given us a role. I imagine it is best for us to fulfill the role that He has given rather than take on a different, human-established and human-centered role in our own power

and to the neglect of Christ's Gospel. If Christ is to be exalted in our ministry, then we cannot be.

If we are not exalted, then there is another application we must grasp for ourselves. In humility, we can strive to lead our churches in a way that is good for them without fighting to achieve our own preferences, polity, or direction. We get to serve as overseers, not domineer. The serpents gospel, in this New Testament age, has wreaked the most havoc in our church through the pastoral office. This needs to change.

# *Final words*

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We have come to a point where we must, once again, reorient our lives to the true Gospel and actively strive to forsake the false gospel that was first introduced in the Garden of Eden. There comes a time every so often when this must be done. When our churches become houses of mediocrity rather than houses of faith, we have to, once again, look toward the cross rather than toward ourselves. This is where the doctrine of God's grace impacts our lives with devastating force. By devastating, I mean that we are brought to humility in our own weakness and Christ raises us up in His own strength. If Christ is the only one who saves and sanctifies, then there is, again, nothing we can do to earn the gift He gives. If there is nothing we can possibly do to earn the gift that He gives, then there is nothing we can do to separate ourselves from the amazing grace of our Lord.

If we have somehow given in to or even perpetuated the false gospel of the serpent, it is not an act that can ever separate us from the grace of God. The gospel of the serpent

taking root in our lives may indicate one of two things, either we have never been brought under Christ's saving authority or we have slipped and Christ is convicting us and raising us up. We hurt ourselves when we buy into the false gospel. God, though, always brings those who are His back into His grace and raises them up again. This is the encouragement we receive. This encouragement is only possible if Christ's Gospel is a gospel of grace and if the serpent's gospel is rejected entirely. Let us turn back to Christ in a time when the serpent's gospel is so prevalent in our society and in many of our churches. "You Can't" might just be the greatest news we can receive in our time!

*You Can't*

*Andrew Paul Cannon*