

Revelation (I): Introduction

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Our subject is one that proves to be mysterious and often confusing, even unapproachable to the average Christian. For this reason, it has been exploited by the devil through human speculators to the disillusionment of millions. Our goal in examining the book of Revelation is to accomplish a thorough and respectful study of God's final scriptural message to mankind prior to the commencement of the end of time. We will not be able to answer every question, but we do seek to couch the entire text of this book is an unmistakable timeframe that will eliminate 99 percent of the wild speculation that surrounds it. Thirty lessons have been planned for this series. Now, we begin by introducing some background material to set the stage for this grand drama that is the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Discussion

I. Background

A. A Time Of Intense Persecution

1. sadly, every generation since the resurrection of Christ has believed it was surely the last
 - a. because evil men tend to wax worse and worse, it always seems to the current generation of saints as if God must be about to act (Second Thessalonians 2:1-12)
 - b. he has acted before, in destroying the world of Noah and then wiping out Sodom and Gomorrah and he has promised to act once more in destroying this Earth and inaugurating eternity both for the righteous and the wicked (Second Peter 3:1-13)
 - c. the fine line we are required to walk is in being constantly prepared for the day of judgment while not becoming so consumed with it that we neglect every other necessity of life
2. yet with all the immorality surrounding us and as much as we may believe that the persecution of Christians has grown so great, there was a much earlier generation who was persecuted far more sorely than ours and the world continued anyway
 - a. Christians of the first and second centuries were persecuted first by the Jews and then by the Romans, who held the power of law over the world and could execute anyone who refused to worship Caesar
 - b. the saints may very well have expected the gospel age was expiring, but in fact, the faith would rise even higher in a few generations and so God's patience would bear fruit
3. if a termination of the Earth was not the solution the early saints sought, then what was?
 - a. the apostles had forewarned every convert of this threat (Second Timothy 3:10-13)
 - b. they had borne the force of persecution themselves, from governments, countrymen and even brethren
 - c. some, like Stephen and James, were martyred for their faith, thus planting the notion in every saint's mind that he or she could be next (Acts 9:1-2, 12:1-4)
 - d. the book of Hebrews was written primarily to convince Jewish Christians not to revert to Judaism just to ward off persecution from unbelieving family and friends (Hebrews 10:32-39)
 - e. and, lastly, John was disturbed on the island of Patmos to receive a consoling Revelation from Jesus that would promise comfort in the short term and victory in the long

B. Conditions At The Turn of the First Century

1. imagine that it is just a few years short of the turn of the century—the turn from the first to the second that is
 - a. Jesus Christ was crucified about sixty years ago and since that time, his body, the church, has grown by leaps and bounds wherever the gospel has traveled—and that takes in all the world (see Colossians 1:6) in fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies about the kingdom
 - b. governments have been variously unconcerned and unkind to the church, but that is to be expected of a movement that has changed the world forever
 - c. there have been some martyrs for the cause of Christ since Stephen but now the persecution is becoming quite troubling
 - d. about 25 years ago, a Roman Caesar named Nero troubled the saints, burning the city and blaming the Christians for it
 - e. many of your brethren were abused and some even killed then over that

f. but still, in the big picture, the gospel has continued to spread and the kingdom of Christ numbers more subjects now than ever

2. but that period of growth and relative peace now seems unalterably threatened by a new Roman ruler whose name is Domitian; it is the year A.D. 96

a. Domitian is a horrible, blasphemous ruler who goes so far as to demand that his royal subjects address him as Lord, God Caesar

b. most of his subjects go along with this demand because to refuse may very well mean execution, but this demand is far too much for you and your brethren in Christ

c. to call one on earth God is to deny Christ and seal your eternal condemnation where Nero and Domitian will suffer by your side in hellfire

3. Domitian has even deputized an emperor worship committee to travel to the various provinces, erecting temples to him and forcing the population to worship him

a. the committee has arrived in your home of Asia Minor where the church is strong in number and faith

b. news has preceded the committee of trouble in other cities (some of your brethren have submitted to Domitian's demands and the churches are in an uproar

c. the most striking news, though, concerns your brethren that have refused to bow before Caesar and call him God (quite a few of them have been executed

4. you haven't said anything, but a friend of yours in the church was discussing the whole sad situation with you this morning before the preaching

a. he is concerned that perhaps the God of heaven is no longer watching over his people ("Has God, too, submitted to Domitian? Is he powerless to stop the emperor from persecuting His saints. Why doesn't he act?") (Habakkuk 1:1-4)

b. you think of the prophet Habakkuk's questions, eerily similar to these and remember that the answer held that God was still in control

c. the number of saints in worship today seems smaller than last Sunday; a number of the new converts are not here

d. would it be that they are afraid of the committee? What will become of the church of Christ, the very cause of Christ, if God does not act? When will we ever find consolation and overcome? Or will we at all?

C. News From Patmos

1. but, then a speaker stands up and proclaims that news has come from Patmos where the apostle John is

2. John has received a revelation from God that will bring comfort to you all and settle your hearts and furnish you with new courage to resist the devilish emperor and hold true to your confession

3. the speaker says that the message has been encrypted in a code of numerical and scriptural symbolism.

a. you are familiar with this type of Apocalyptic literature, for the prophets Zechariah and Ezekiel used it and you understand from the fulfillment of those prophecies what the symbols mean

b. the numbers will denote very general characteristics while the scriptures will describe specific kinds of events

1. two symbolizes strength, courage and energy

2. three symbolizes divinity

3. three and one half symbolizes incompleteness and imperfection

4. four symbolizes the world where we live

5. six is a bad omen, similar to our view of 13

6. seven is perfection and completeness

7. ten symbolizes human completeness

8. twelve symbolizes organized religion

9. one thousand symbolizes ultimate completeness

4. infidels like the emperor may understand the numbers if they intercept the message but they will never see into the scriptures for they are naturally untrained

a. God has seen that this message will only encourage His people and not tip off Domitian's servants to the way in which the Lord will cease the persecution, punish the guilty and set the church back to its mission

b. perhaps most encouraging to you and your brethren is God's timetable

1. the opening of the message informs you that these things will come to pass shortly (Revelation 1:1-3)
2. if the message had told of events 2000 years from now, it would have only discouraged you more, but the turn of events is promised to happen shortly and so it is a consolation to you
5. such language is not new to scripture and God had never failed to make words mean things (Genesis 41:25-32)
6. he had even told the Roman brethren that he would bruise Satan's power shortly in using false doctrine if they would adhere to the truth (Romans 16:17-20)

Conclusion

The Revelation has barely begun and surely the speakers of the first century could have recited it in less than 31 weeks, but we are so far removed from that era that it will take us longer to get into the right frame of mind to understand what they experienced and why this message consoled them. In the next installment, we shall examine the first eight verses of chapter one.

Revelation (2): The Time Is Near

(Revelation 1:1-8)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Whenever you use the phrase, “The time is near,” in relation to the book of Revelation, people get excited and their speculations begin to land upon current events. That phrase is attached to the book and has been for more than 1900 years. The time that was near was almost two millennia ago and it has surely come and gone. The most important piece of information to understanding the chronological context of this Revelation is found in the first three verses, which are among the eight we shall examine today (Revelation 1:1-8).

Discussion

I. Things Which Must Shortly Take Place

A. Review of the First Century Condition

1. the Roman empire ruled the world, extending beyond the Palestine of Christ’s day into the land of Asia Minor, present day Turkey

2. although Pontius Pilate had not seemed particularly concerned about Jesus Christ when he allowed him to be crucified, the church he established on that cross became a great problem with ensuing Caesars

a. if ever the church were going to be eliminated by a wounded devil and wicked men, this was the time

b. as an infant is far more vulnerable than an adult, so the infant church was persistently pursued by the emperor and his minions in the hope that it would be intimidated out of existence

c. the Christians who were still around to hear their preachers read what I just read to you were the few and the faithful who had refused, so far, to give up their faith to save their necks

3. what they require is some message that will encourage them to continue fighting that good fight and some explanation as to when this persecution might abate and allow them room to breathe

a. the Revelation fills that purpose, having immediate meaning to its initial audience

b. modern commentators are usually a selfish bunch, wanting to take the Revelation for their own generation and leave it practically useless to the first and second century who suffered far worse persecution than we can imagine

B. Four Perspectives On The Book

1. through the years, commentators have taken four different views of the Revelation, regarding when the predictions were to be fulfilled

a. the Preterist Historical view holds that the prophecies in the book have to do with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70

1. those who hold to this view, like brother Foy E. Wallace, Jr., also date the book about a generation earlier

2. the book, however, was universally thought to be of the late date for 500 years after Christ and the persecution it describes is not consistent with the emperor in the early date, Nero

b. the Continuous Historical view holds that the events in the book cover all of human history from the cross to the second coming

1. commentators like Presbyterian Albert Barnes find much of the imagery to be descriptive of the Roman Catholic church

2. the contextual clues from the opening and closing chapters, however, make that untenable since it would promise no relief to its initial audience

c. the Futurist view holds that everything in the book is meant to describe a literal thousand year reign of Christ on Earth

1. Hal Lindsey is the most famous proponent of this premillennial view that completely robs the Revelation from every audience of readers except its last

2. again, the chronological context clues defeat this theory

d. the Historical Background view says that the Revelation prophecies were fulfilled in the demise and fall of the Roman empire

1. brethren Homer Hailey and Robert Harkrider and Baptist Ray Summer have taken this perspective, which allows the book's time clues to fit and give meaning to the first audience
 2. the internal markings also fit the age of Domitian's persecution at the end of the first century
2. in our study, we shall begin with an authorship date of about A.D. 96 and the expectation that John is recording predictions of things that were then shortly to come to pass

C. Chronological Clues

1. in the first three verses, you can learn everything you need to know relative to when these predictions were to be fulfilled
 - a. for the purposes of an early twenty-first century study, were they intended for the year 100 or this year or next?
 - b. if words still mean things and the promises of a caring God can still be trusted, these comforting predictions were to find fulfillment long ago, not today
2. verse one says that the things we are about to read of "must shortly come to pass"
 - a. *must* is an impersonal verb that indicates a moral necessity is involved; the nature of the case is such that the things revealed here must take place as and when prophesied
 - b. God, the eternally vigilant protector of widows and orphans, is making a statement that he will soon strike in defense of his faith, and he adds a guarantee that all here prophesied will be fulfilled just thus
 1. for God to offer these Christians false hope of swift relief would violate his honor and record (see he would be the God of good intentions rather than remarkable results)
 2. therefore, it was a moral imperative that God act then to relieve his disciples from the tyranny of Domitian
3. did God act or did he fail, allowing them to be swallowed up whole?
 - a. is this prophecy delayed at least 1900 years while they rot in their graves?
 - b. can we count on God to say what he means, mean what he says, and make it happen when a moral imperative is involved?
 - c. I believe so for I am faithful in the God of the Bible who does not fail (Hebrews 13:5-6)
 - d. therefore, the prophecy related by John must have been carried out "shortly" from when that term was attached to it
4. furthermore, when this book was first read and verse 3 promised blessing upon all those who heard and kept it, that original audience who suffered so greatly that they required a book like this, would surely have known it was meant for them that the time was near

II. Sent and Signified

A. Sent to The Seven Churches of Asia

1. the book is addressed, not to modern churches or authorities, but to the seven churches of Asia Minor, which no longer even exist
2. there were at least three more churches in that region (Troas of Acts 20:5, Hierapolis of Colossians 4:13 and Colossae of Colossians 1:2), but these seven are selected probably as a complete representation of the conditions of churches all over
3. imagine that you are a Christian in a predominantly Muslim nation today and your faith is illegal
 - a. you practice it anyway because it is so strong, but you know the threat of intimidation and even death is hanging over your head every moment
 - b. as the church seems to become more and more isolated and you begin to wonder like Habakkuk how long God will wait to help you, a message like this arrives
 - c. there is no question as to whether it describes your ordeal or events some 2000 years in the future, for it promises blessing and grace in a time that is near
 1. the first beatitude of Revelation is found in verse 3: "Blessed is he who read and those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written in it; for the time is near."
 2. now hope is renewed, but how?

B. Signified by Christ's Angel

1. Revelation is sometimes called the "Apocalypse," not because it describes some great destruction, but because it is given in signs and symbolism
 - a. the word "Apocalypse" means the use of signs and symbols and any other meaning has

simply been added by speculators

b. this book is not to be read with an eye toward the literal fulfillment of every prophecy

2. Revelation is filled with vibrant images, many of them recycled from previous use in the Old Testament, which makes them more understandable to an audience steeped in Mosaic reading

a. it becomes somewhat more difficult then for modern men to deduce exactly what historical event may have been fulfilling what sign, but that is less than necessary anyway

b. understanding the book's purpose and timing is enough, and knowing that the church did survive the threat of the Roman empire lends comfort to all who feel similarly threatened today

III. Greetings From The Godhead

A. The Three

1. each of the three members of the Godhood are introduced in verses 4-5

2. Him who is, was and is to come is the Father, the same "I AM" of Exodus 3

3. the seven Spirits is the Holy Spirit, signified in his perfection by the numerology

4. Jesus is identified as prophet (see the faithful witness), priest (see he who sacrificed himself and became the firstborn from the dead) and king (see the ruler over the kings of the Earth); he is pictured as alive and preparing to return again someday

B. A Kingdom and Priesthood

1. contrary to Premillennialism, after the day of Pentecost, the kingdom is always spoken of as being in existence, for Jesus established it on the cross and took its throne when he ascended into heaven (see Acts 2:29-33); we are conveyed into it by conversion (see Colossians 1:13)

2. yet we are also a kingdom of priests (First Peter 2:9-10)

Conclusion

Revelation (3): Alpha and Omega

(Revelation 1:9-20)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Although the book we are studying is sometimes called “The Revelation of John,” it by no means originated with or features the apostle of that name. This is a Revelation of and by Jesus the Christ. In the second half of the first chapter, John describes our Lord as he appeared to the man that day on Patmos. His glorified image is grander than anything that movies could produce and is intended to imply confidence into the souls of believing readers. [Read Revelation 1:9-20.]

Discussion

I. In The Spirit On The Lord’s Day

A. John

1. until now, John has described himself in the third person, but here he becomes both the narrator and a participant in the Revelation of this Apocalyptic message, a message of signs and symbols

a. the aged apostle is not writing from the luxury of retirement or the ivory towers of theological theory; he writes from a sense of brotherhood and companionship in the tribulation that Christianity has cost its disciples

b. Jesus had warned his followers that it would be like this and his prediction did not fail; that so many had held their faith through it all does much to prove the validity of their trust

2. as ever-present as their distress was, John also quickly takes note that they share also in the kingdom and patience of their savior

a. the kingdom was in existence, much to the dismay of premillennialists who look for its establishment at this late date in the Revelation

b. John was a citizen in that kingdom (see 1:6), a present reality and not a future utopia

c. grace was strong enough to outweigh the challenges that resulted and thus his faith was strengthened by every threat

1. this is the same spirit which dwelt in the apostle Paul who counted all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ (see Philippians 3:8)

2. it is the same spirit which must dwell within us if we are to overcome the world and maintain our citizenship in the kingdom of God (Philippians 3:20-4:1)

B. On Patmos

1. Patmos was a barren, rocky island about eight miles long and five miles wide, located about 65 miles to the southwest of Ephesus and Asia Minor

a. the Roman government used this natural prison as a place of banishment for political prisoners and one could assume that this is the physical reason for John’s being there

b. a historian of that era named Eusebius adds that tradition held that John was exiled to Patmos by the Roman emperor Domitian in 95 A.D., the year before we estimate this Revelation was given to deal with Domitian’s persecutions (*Ecclesiastical History*, III.18.1)

2. what was John’s crime?

a. the same crime that landed him and Peter in a Jerusalem jail sixty years earlier, when Judaism still held some sway in Judah (Acts 4:13-22)

b. now the city was laid waste, the temple was felled and Rome was no longer troubled by uprisings in the province

c. history says that Peter was crucified by Nero about the same time as the city’s demise and that Paul was also martyred for the faith before 70 A.D.

d. although quite old and probably the last living among the twelve apostles, John’s voice had not been stilled by age or outrage

C. In The Spirit On The Lord’s Day

1. as Ezekiel reported that the Spirit took him up and brought him in the visions of God to Jerusalem and beyond (see Ezekiel 8:3), so it seems John is experiencing something much more than just a proper frame of mind for ordinary worship

- a. from the phrase's reappearance in Revelation 4:2 and elsewhere (see 17:3, 21:10), it seems very clear that John was suddenly plunged into something like a trance in which he was empowered by the Holy Spirit to see a vision of things shortly to come to pass
- b. before Peter visited Cornelius in Acts 10, he too was put in a trance by the Holy Spirit to see a vision of the total fulfillment of the law of Moses and the propriety of offering the gospel to Gentiles
- 2. this is the Bible's only reference to the Lord's Day and John does not go further to identify exactly which day of the week it is
 - a. perhaps that is because it should be so obvious as the day of the week on which Christ was raised from the dead and the communion supper was to be observed forever to commemorate it
 - b. Sunday is the day when the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the apostles occurred and when the church assembled for worship, including communion and contribution
- 3. as his trance takes hold, John is disturbed by a loud voice, not a trumpet, but a voice like a trumpet
 - a. the voice makes no uncertain sounds, but clearly announces its origin and intention
 - b. the speaker is Christ, the Alpha and Omega, just as his father was described; he is eternal as indicated by the use of the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet
 - c. John was instructed to write down the things that he would see, thus to render them as scripture that could be transmitted to persecuted saints in Asia Minor and preserved for future generations

II. Turn To See

- A. One Like the Son of Man (see Revelation 1:12-17)
 - 1. in the midst of seven golden lamp stands stands our glorified and mighty Savior
 - a. he is called the son of man 85 times in the New Testament to emphasize his connection with humanity
 - b. here the reader is reminded by this phrase that Jesus is a high priest who can understand man's suffering and lend genuine aid (Hebrews 4:14-16)
 - 2. he is clothed in a priest's robe with a royal sash (Hebrews 7:25-28)
 - 3. the artist's renderings of our Lord never look anything like this, but John shows Jesus to have the white hair of an aged man, but pure enough to denote holiness as well as the combined wisdom of experience and deity
 - 4. in his gospel, John described our Lord as the Word that had been with God, was God and came to walk among men
 - a. the Hebrew writer says the word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword and able to pierce through man's every pretense and defense
 - b. here we see this attribute brought to life in his eyes like flaming fire
 - 5. although our feet today are pampered by comfortable shoes, the feet of Christ have been tried as in a furnace and polished by distress into a fine brass, able to march upon his enemies
 - 6. the voice that had once sounded like a trumpet now resembles the sound of many waters, a noise that overwhelms all else and demands undivided attention
 - 7. he stands thus in the midst of seven golden lamp stands and holds seven stars in his right hand as a sharp two-edged sword emerges from his mouth
 - a. obviously, the sword is the word of God (see Ephesians 6:17), double-edged for it offers grace to the submissive while also promising punishment to the rebellious
 - b. it is the power of God unto salvation (see Romans 1:16) as well as the standard against which eternal punishment will be merited (see John 12:48, Second Thessalonians 1:8-9)
 - 8. if you have ever stared at the unobscured sun, you get some idea of how magnificent this picture was to John; it was almost overwhelming but he could not look away until at last he fell at Christ's feet as if he were dead
 - a. one day, everyone of us here is going to see this glorified Christ sitting upon the judgment right before us
 - b. some will feel a warm hand upon our shoulder and the reassurance words, "Well done, good and faithful servant."; others will hear a sound like a gavel pounding the table and a sentence of doom pronounced upon our unfaithful existence
 - c. if we can figure out how to live and revere like John, we can find heaven instead of hell

B. The First and the Last (see Revelation 1:17-18)

1. this voice as many waters is heard by John to claim to be the first and the last, alive forevermore with power over death
2. by facing the valley of the shadow of death and emerging victorious from the clutches of hades on the third day, Jesus destroyed the power and curious fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15)
3. as the jailer and his friends had no reason to fear incarceration for he holds the keys, so the Savior and his friends have no reason to fear death for Jesus holds the keys to death which claims the body and Hades which enters the soul until the judgment day (First Corinthians 15:54-57)

C. Write (see Revelation 1:19-20)

1. John is told again to grab his quill and start writing down what he sees
 - a. while the Revelation John sees has initial and chief meaning to the first audience of Christians who read it, it continues to possess an element of encouragement to every succeeding generation that reads of God's promise and protection
 - b. the concern of Christians all across a persecuted empire echoed the call of Habakkuk-how long will God wait to avenge our deaths and end this trial?
 - c. John is about to see the answer in signs and symbols which can be communicated to saints who understand how they are recycled from the Old Testament
2. the seven stars are identified as the angels, or messengers, of the seven churches of Asia Minor; they were closely united to the sword of his word in verse 16 and seem to be the men who would proclaim the message in each church as they received it
3. the lamp stands symbolize the seven churches themselves

Conclusion

Revelation (4): Ephesus church of Christ

(Revelation 2:1-7)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

As we move on into the second and third chapters of the Revelation, we arrive at the most familiar texts in all the book. While everything else seems to be so apocalyptic and difficult to apply, these chapters are instantly relatable to conditions in churches in every age. Revelation 1 described our Lord as standing in the midst of the churches and he continues there today, watching over our affairs and ruling his kingdom. The church at Ephesus is no stranger to us, since we read of its founding in the Acts of the Apostles and receive a laudatory update on its condition in Paul's epistle to the church. That condition had changed in the span of a few decades; Ephesus had devolved from a strong and committed congregation into one that had "left its first love." In this opening lesson on the seven churches of Asia, we will look to make application of the plaudits and warnings that Jesus mailed to them.

Discussion

I. About Ephesus

A. The City of Ephesus

1. the ancient city of Ephesus numbered about a quarter of a million residents, making it the fourth largest city in the Roman world
2. Ephesus was very fortunately located on a natural harbor which made it the most important seaport of Asia Minor; it was called the "Supreme Metropolis of Asia," a melting pot where people of every class met, lived and did business
3. Ephesus was also blessed with a limited self-government from the Roman empire; she was wealthy, prosperous and magnificent and an obvious distraction to faith

B. The Church at Ephesus

1. in about the A.D. 52, the apostle Paul visited Ephesus on his way from Corinth to Jerusalem as part of his second journey (Acts 18:18-21)
2. on his third journey, he spent an extended period there
 - a. he found some who were practicing the baptism of John which had been taken out of effect with the sacrifice of Christ (Acts 19:1-7)
 1. Paul's teaching proves that it is possible to undergo a form of baptism that is outdated or insufficient to bring one into Christ; today, it might be the Catholic sprinkling of babies, denominational church membership baptism, or imaginary episodes of Holy Spirit baptism
 2. today, there is only one baptism (see Ephesians 4:5) and as the New Testament ended, that was clearly water baptism (First Peter 3:20-21)
 - b. he preached about the church (Acts 19:8-10)
 1. kingdom and church were used interchangeably by Jesus when he promised to build the latter and give the keys to Peter for the former
 2. the kingdom was to be established in the first century (see Mark 9:1) and the church clearly answers this prophecy
 3. some say that we should preach only Christ and not the church, but following the apostolic example of Paul, we must preach the body of Christ, as well as the head
 - c. Paul worked genuine miracles and caused a decline in the magical arts (Acts 19:11-20)
 - d. it was not until he trifled with the beloved temple of Diana, however, that he got into big trouble (Acts 19:21-20:1)
 1. the temple of Diana was at once "a treasure house, a museum, and a place of refuge for criminals. It furnished employment for many, including the silversmiths who made miniature shrines of Diana."
 - a. Diana was considered the mother goddess of the Earth, who tradition says was born in the woods outside Ephesus when her image fell from the sky
 - b. her icons were crafted with a chest completely covered with breasts to signify her claim to be the mother of the Earth
 - c. the most renowned of her statues stood at the entrance to her temple in Ephesus, where

she was worshiped

d. this scene was much like Catholic cathedrals are today in larger, European cities, being surrounded by shops selling icons and images

2. such idolatry formed a great challenge to preaching Christ and a single God

II. The Text (Revelation 2:1-7)

A. I Know You

1. as Jesus addresses this historic church, he immediately reminds them of his omniscience
a. on Earth, only our parents, our spouses and closest friends can get close enough to know us as well as we know ourselves

b. spiritually, however, Jesus is close enough to know us better than we know ourselves

1. we tend to deceive ourselves at times and overestimate our strength or underestimate our weaknesses and sometimes even vice-versa

2. we have selective memories and conveniently forget the things we want to forget

3. not so Jesus, who knows us intimately and forgets nothing

2. when Jesus says he knows the Ephesus church, it is from watching the church as her king and smiling upon her faithfulness and frowning upon her sins

a. she is commended for her works, labor, patience and intolerance of false teachers

b. this was a church that was a working church, not just keeping house or satisfied to rest on past laurels while dwindling away through deaths

c. the devil, not content to allow this church free influence in Ephesus, had dispatched false teachers to Ephesus, claiming to be sent from God

d. like the noble Bereans and much in line with the teaching of John, the Ephesians had not taken for granted that all teachers were true, had tested these men and found out the liars (First John 4:1-6)

e. particular false doctrines are mentioned, for the churches should have been all speaking the same things, according to the inerrant revelation of the Holy Spirit to each

1. the Nicolaitans apparently taught a form of Gnosticism in which what the flesh did was not perceived to affect the spirit in any material way

2. such a doctrine excused immorality and deluded believers into indulging their sinful appetites without any remorse or restraint

3. above all, Ephesus was a church that had been tried and proven through such hardships and continual labor; they had persevered without growing weary

B. I Have This Against You

1. I suppose we would be tempted to weigh their good deeds in a balance against the bad and, if the good outweighs the evil, to be satisfied

2. yet this is the Jesus who challenged the rich young ruler to rid himself of one lonely idol amidst a life of moral service

3. now, he turns from praising Ephesus to chastening her because she had left her first love

a. men leave their earthly first loves all too often, abandoning the wives of their youth to pursue someone new and less familiar

b. other men stay at home, but allow their minds and ultimately their hearts to wander until they continue to be in the same place but without the passion they once had for their wives; they go through the motions but not because their hearts are in it

c. this is the case in Ephesus as they continue to do the right things, but not necessarily for the right reasons

4. this Jesus has always sought men to worship him in spirit and in truth and to do works of charity with love and not some secretly selfish motive

C. Repent

1. finally, he counsels them to awaken from their complacency and remember how they had once done things there, to return to their former habits and motivations lest they be swallowed up by apathy

2. it is much easier to stay in love than to get back in once you have fallen out, so the challenge presented to them is great

3. sometimes as we grow as Christians, we gain knowledge, but lose the spark of enthusiasm and compassion that made our discipleship great in the beginning; the key is to grow on both sides of that coin

D. Threat and Reward

1. the threat that Jesus makes involves the removal of their lampstand or candlestick in older translations
 - a. since the lampstand symbolized the church's place in the midst of Christ, its removal must mean the end of his possession and their status as a faithful congregation
 - b. today, churches drift and drift as well until the lampstand is removed, at the point at which there is nothing to left to be salvaged there
2. the alternative for those who reform is the promise of access to the tree of life in God's paradise, clearly returning the blessing of eternal life that was cut off when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge in the garden of Eden

III. Applications

A. Test Yourselves

1. we may hide a wicked character from our brethren by wearing pious clothing, but God is not going to be fooled (Hebrews 4:11-13)
2. he knows us better than we know ourselves and we ought to allow him to chasten us through reading his word and examining ourselves (Second Corinthians 13:5)

B. Test Teachers

1. The Bereans "were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).
2. nowhere are we told to accept everything a gospel preacher tells us as truth until we have examined his teaching against the scriptures (Second Peter 2:1-3)
3. if apostles did not object to such examination, why would a mere uninspired preacher object?

C. Do Not Grow Weary

1. the Ephesians were commended for not growing weary, because life can be overwhelming at times and the need around us can be greater than we feel able to bear
2. this is just another tool of the devil to beat us down in time and win us back before it is all over (Galatians 6:6-10)
3. when we grow weary with doing good, we begin to pass up opportunities and justify our indifference based on the past; we retire too early from our labors

D. Remember Your First Love

1. the passion and excitement of new love is rivaled only by the thrill of recent conversion to Christ
2. zeal surpasses knowledge and nothing seems impossible
3. as time goes on, some lose their zeal and settle into a rut of stunted growth and even disillusionment; then we require revival
 - a. it is better to stay excited than to try to regain it once it is lost (First Corinthians 15:58)
 - b. make sure your heart is always in it (First Corinthians 13:1-3)

E. Lamp Stands

1. the church's lampstand represents the accuracy of its claim to be a church "of Christ"
 - a. so long as we cling to our mission with zeal and pursue it with industry, the lampstand is secure
 - b. so long as we uphold truth and forbid error in the pulpit, it is safe
 - c. so long as we strive to keep the church unblemished and refuse to tolerate immorality, it is steady
2. churches do not become unsound overnight and Ephesus is proof of that
 - a. back in the 60s, she was fine, but in about 30 years, she has weakened
 - b. some churches are unsound because of doctrine; others like Ephesus are unsound because of a lackadaisical attitude
 - c. let us make certain our lampstand is secure

Conclusion

Revelation (5): Smyrna church of Christ

(Revelation 2:8-11)

Introduction

As we move on into the second and third chapters of the Revelation, we arrive at the most familiar texts in all the book. While everything else seems to be so apocalyptic and difficult to apply, these chapters are instantly relatable to conditions in churches in every age. Our Lord identifies himself here as "the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life." He is omniscient and eternal. The church at Smyrna is one of only two in this series of seven that receives only commendation in its letter from the Master. Smyrna was a hotbed of emperor worship, but the Christians there were resolute in their determination to worship only the God of heaven. This letter is the shortest of the seven, but contains timeless encouragement to the Christian of any age.

Discussion

I. About Smyrna

A. The City of Smyrna

1. Smyrna was located 35 miles up the coast of the Aegean Sea from Ephesus and actually rivaled Ephesus in prosperity and commerce
2. at the same time, Smyrna fell all over itself to venerate the Roman emperor
 - a. as far back as 195 B.C., Smyrna was building a shrine to the goddess of Rome and by 26 A.D., Smyrna beat out ten other cities for the honor of building a temple unto Emperor Tiberius
 - b. imagine, if instead of Presidential Libraries in Austin and College Station, we had temples to deify Lyndon Johnson and Bush the Elder, and all within walking distance were expected to worship them there; that was the situation the Christians faced in Smyrna

B. The Church at Smyrna

1. we know nothing at all about the founding of the church at Smyrna concerning who was involved and when the work was done
2. quite clearly, however, a good work had been accomplished, for this church was standing strong in the midst of intense pressure to compromise faith in Jehovah with veneration of the empire
 - a. it is during the age in which Revelation is written, during the reign of Emperor Domitian, that every citizen was required to burn a pinch of incense on the altar of the shrine to the deity of Caesar
 - b. once he had done so, the citizen was given a certificate of compliance to prove that he had done his duty, and then could even go and worship all and any gods and goddesses that he liked
 - c. if he refused to burn his incense to the godhead of Caesar, as any faithful Christian would, he would be branded a troublemaker and enemy of the state
 - d. you can imagine the pressure and persecution that would result from this constant state of affairs

II. The Text (Revelation 2:8-11)

A. Rich Man, Poor Man

1. we have already stated that Smyrna was a prosperous society, but Christians were somewhat cut off from this because of societal ostracism when they rocked the boat in refusing to bow before "Lord, God Caesar"
2. Christ tells the Christians there that he knows their works, tribulation and poverty, and all these are probably closely related
 - a. the temptation is always great to rationalize away the difficult decisions and find a way to appease the devil while convincing yourself that God will not mind
 - b. perhaps even a bit of mental reservation was in order, in which a Christian could go through with the emperor veneration while knowing it was not true, but living a lie is never going to bring you closer to God
 - c. these Christians risked life, love and labor to hold fast the confession of their faith
3. for this reason, Jesus pronounced them rich-not financially, but spiritually
 - a. sometimes, it takes physical impoverishment to ensure spiritual wealth
 - b. not always, but sometimes, and this was one of those times

B. Synagogue of Satan

1. the Jews in Smyrna who did not obey Jesus, but believed in Jehovah, were not as determined as the Christians
2. they appeased the civil authorities and burned incense to Caesar, while knowing and believing it was false
 - a. their confession then was lost as they became hypocrites and gradually infidels
 - b. they were guilty of the sin they killed Jesus over in Jerusalem-blasphemy
 - c. it becomes clear that these were Jews in claim only, and not in reality
 - d. true Jews would never have accepted the idea that there was another God, but those in Smyrna did; they were a synagogue of Satan
3. moreover, the Jews used this conflict to accuse the Christians to Rome
 - a. tradition holds that Polycarp was persecuted to the death in Smyrna as a result of the work of this synagogue of Satan
 - b. at the age of 86, Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John, was burned at the stake on a Sabbath day
 - c. and although, the law of Moses would have prevented the Jews from any work on that day, they delighted in gathering the logs for the fire
 - d. Polycarp's last words were reportedly:

"Eighty and six years I have served Christ and he has never done my wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me? I fear not the fire that burns for a season and after a while is quenched. Why do you delay? Come, do your will." As the flames licked his body, he prayed, "I thank thee that thou hast graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour that I may receive a portion in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ."

4. and so the combination of Rome and the Jews continued, even after the sacking of Jerusalem, as Christians are targeted by unbelievers for punishment and intolerance

C. Tribulation Ten Days

1. although Jesus knew of their sufferings, he did not promise to remove them, only to lend comfort and strength through them
2. ten days of suffering meant a full measure of trial in Revelation numerology and symbolism; their suffering would be long, but not permanent
3. imagine all that they had gone through, that one of their own had been burned at the stake for the same convictions they held and practices they conducted and yet there was still a church of Christ in Smyrna
4. now they receive this letter which promises only more challenges; thankfully, it also promises an end to them and comfort in the meanwhile
 - a. "Be faithful unto death" must have had an ominous ring to it, knowing that anyone of them or all of them could be targeted for just that fate
 - b. to be faithful even to the point of death is necessary though to obtaining a crown of life to wear in eternity
 - c. the first death we all must face who do not live long enough to witness the return of Christ first, but the second death will not harm the faithful
 - d. the second death is in a lake of fire, a spiritual separation from the goodness of God that endures for the rest of eternity

III. Applications

A. Poverty and Prosperity

1. everything is relative, but when we are talking about poverty and prosperity in the divine estimation, we had better discern the standard
2. the saints in Smyrna could have been as well off as their neighbors, but sacrificed material advancement because the price was too high
3. and although their balances on Earth seemed to diminish, their returns in heaven were multiplying exponentially
4. obeying the commands of the Bible will necessarily cost us something financially; it probably

will not impoverish us, but it will cost us

- a. the needs of our brethren will make us want to sacrifice for them (Acts 4:32-37)
 - b. the work of the church will lead us to sacrifice to fund it (First Corinthians 16:1-2)
 - c. sharing is not a childhood lesson that we forget after we pass into adulthood (Hebrews 13:16)
5. at other times, we must quit the competition of the world, the ambition to excel, when its cost is too high
- a. if all working longer and harder will achieve is more money, and at the expense of time with family and God, it is not worth it (Proverbs 23:4-5)
 - b. the value of a crown of life will always outweigh houses and cars and checking accounts in reality, but will you realize it (First Peter 1:3-5)

B. Life and Death and Life and Death

1. Jesus introduces the concept of resurrection to his readers as a subtle reminder that there is something after this life
 - a. as he lived and died and then lived again, so every faithful saint can enjoy the same rebirth from the first death (First Corinthians 15:12-19)
 - b. even if this life ends in ignominious demise upon a cross or at a stake or in a hail of gunfire, there is something more
 - c. as Paul faced execution, he told Timothy that although he was being poured out as a drink offering, he looked forward to wearing the crown of life that belongs to all those who love the appearing of our Lord
2. remaining faithful unto death is part of a test, just like the test administered upon Job, who passed splendidly
 - a. today it is very unlikely that any of us will be compelled to die for Jesus, but then it was possible every day
 - b. today, we should be as concerned with remaining faithful unto ridicule, unto mockery, unto ostracism (First Peter 4:12-19)

C. How To Become a Church of Satan

1. the words "synagogue of Satan" are just as plain as "church of Satan"
 - a. just as there were no Jews calling themselves members of a synagogue of Satan in the first century, so there are no Christians who think themselves members of a church of Satan today
 - b. what would it take to make a church, of Satan?
2. what did it take to make the Jews of Satan?
 - a. compromise with the world and appeasement of the devil
 - b. the same will make any church a church of Satan today
3. we compromise our faith individually when we worship Jehovah on Sunday, but give the rest of the week to the guidance of the tempter
 - a. we might rationalize that a little bad language, use of alcohol, nicotine or drugs, and lust are necessary to fit in, but if we are supposed to be living above the world, why would we want to fit in the world anyway?
 - b. we must not be like those Jews with their mental reservation, but boldly hold fast to our confession of faith (Hebrews 10:23)

Conclusion

What can we learn from the church in Smyrna? Everything. They were faithful when faith was out of season and today it is a dangerous proposition in other ways. Follow the example of these brethren and never compromise your beliefs just to appease the world or its prince.

Revelation (6): Pergamos church of Christ

(Revelation 2:12-17)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

While Revelation chapters two and three are rife with imagery, the instructions to the various churches are also very clear and relatable to modern times. While the rest of the book is consumed with prophecy, these chapters also describe soundness of doctrine and practice in a way that is valuable to us as students today. We are introduced to the Pergamos church of Christ in Revelation 2:12 and we discover a congregation that is proving faithful in the midst of great evil, but also somewhat indecisive regarding the false teaching that is trying to infiltrate their holy ranks.

Discussion

I. About Pergamos

A. The City of Pergamos

1. Pergamos was the most northern of the seven cities, the official capital of Asia Minor; Pliny, her governor, said that she was "the most illustrious city of Asia"

2. Pergamos was the most pagan of the seven cities, all of which were devoted to some false deity

a. Pergamos became known for its sensuous worship and imperial cult, enforcing loyalty to the "Lord Caesar"

b. as a legal center for the region, tests of loyalty that would challenge the faith of Christians were simple to administer

B. The Church at Pergamos

1. outside of these six verses, we know nothing about the church at Pergamos

2. what we can learn here is that she was an ancient forbear of the modern tendency toward religious compromise to keep the peace and maintain a big tent

II. The Text (Revelation 2:12-17)

A. I Know

1. with his sharp two-edged sword, denoting omniscience, judgment and authority, Jesus informs the church that he knows their works and that they dwell where Satan's throne is located

a. every church is told this fact, that Jesus knows its works

b. we might alternately be relieved in the false notion that God is ignoring our compromise or frustrated that it seems he is ignoring our faithfulness, but rest assured, God knows the church's works, good and bad

2. in Pergamos, their works were closely related to the condition of their hometown

a. Satan's throne is not a literal statement, but a figure of speech meant to identify Pergamos as hotbed of devilish activity; when Christians are threatened with death or ostracism if they choose not to worship "Lord Caesar," Satan is definitely enthroned

b. persecution to bloodshed and faithfulness to death were more than far-off warnings to these Christians; one of their own, Antipas, had been martyred for the same faith they clung to

c. Domitian insisted upon being called "dominus et deus," roughly equivalent to Thomas's confession about Jesus in John 20:28—"my Lord and my God"

1. legend has it that Antipas was roasted alive in a brazen bull

2. at Smyrna, Christians were mainly persecuted by fellow citizens, but at Pergamos, they were tried in courts and made to recant their Christian faith or face the consequences of an immediate death sentence

B. A Few Things Against You

1. most of us would look at what Pergamos had been through, admire their faithfulness and overlook anything else that might be bad

2. Jesus, however, looked at them and loved them and told them how to capitalize upon their courage and become even more faithful in areas where they were currently compromising

3. two errors were being taught in Pergamos and with little apparent resistance from the faithful in

the church

- a. the doctrine of Balaam is one of pragmatic compromise with idols, despite a clear knowledge that they are false
 1. in the Old Testament, it was Balaam the prophet who instructed Moabite King Balak to entice Israel into eating a sacrifice and fornicating in recognition of an idol (see Numbers 25:2-4)
 2. here Balaam stands as a figurative representation of that same spirit of compromise with acknowledged error, just to gain favor with infidels
- b. furthermore, Jesus says that he hates the doctrine of the Nicolaitans
 1. he had commended the Ephesians for opposing this doctrine and his hatred has not cooled at all
 2. the Nicolaitan doctrine is apparently a Gnostic teaching that sins of the flesh did not affect the spirit and were thus harmless
 3. like the spirit of Balaam, this doctrine was rooted in compromise between pure Christianity and corrupt idolatry; the compromise supposedly devoted the mind to Jesus and lent the body to the devil, but Jesus was not content with that arrangement

C. Repent and Overcome

1. the message stuns the pragmatic Christian, the one who believes he can think piously and behave sinfully; you cannot!
2. appeasing the devil and compromising with the world only makes you one of them; repent and disavow any association with such doctrines
3. the sword of Christ's mouth, the word of the living God is sufficient to defeat every device of the tempter as Jesus proved when he was tempted in Matthew 4; test every doctrine and produce a "thus saith the Lord" or reject it as false
4. two things are promised to those who do reject error and cling to truth faithfully
 - a. he will be allowed to eat of the hidden manna; as God allowed Israel to eat bread from heaven, so we shall find every spiritual and physical need met
 - b. he will receive a white stone with a new name written upon it, indicating a vote of innocence through covenant with Christ

III. Applications

A. God Knows

1. we are often burdened with the false concept that we can hide from God (Job 24:21-22)
 - a. he is aware of our good deeds so that we are only bragging when we think to inform him of them; he is aware of our wicked deeds so that we are only foolish when we think he is ignorant of them
 - b. in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, the Pharisee thought he needed to remind God of what a wonderful faster and tither he was, and how he avoided fornication and extortion and injustice, but God already knew all that
 - c. telling God about it is nothing but bragging and the trouble is God already knows the other side as well
2. sometime we become frustrated, though, that it seems we are sowing much good and reaping very little in return
 - a. but it is up to God to give the increase, not for us to invade his authority and reach down into the ground to pull up the grain (First Corinthians 3:6-11)
 - b. you will reap what you sow in due time (Galatians 6:6-10)

B. Living Near Satan's Throne

1. there may be world leaders as wicked as the emperor today, but thankfully we do not have one in America
2. imagine living in a state where worship of the ruler was mandatory and refusal was punished with death
3. we do, however, live in a nation in which Satan exerts considerable influence
 - a. America condones homosexuality, fornication, serial divorce and remarriage and looks the other way at lying, cheating and laziness
 - b. popular entertainment glorifies foul language, filthy jokes and extramarital sex, even among children
 - c. if we are not vexed in the spirit by our surroundings, we are in danger of becoming

desensitized to evil, perhaps even swept into it (Second Peter 2:4-11)

4. we must maintain our disdain for every form of evil, quit grading it on the curve and commit ourselves to rising above it

C. Denial and Compromise

1. imagine those brethren being dragged into a kangaroo court and told that they would either have to bow to Caesar or face death

2. the temptation toward mental reservation or temporary compromise must have been great; praise Caesar now and repent when I get home

a. of course, it is not that easy, for denying Jesus, even under penalty of death is shortsighted and spiritually suicidal (Matthew 10:27-33)

b. that is the obvious denial, but there are more subtle forms (Titus 1:15-16)

c. remember that Jesus knows your works, not only your oral confession, but your daily conversation

4. how much do we love the approval of men and hate the thought that some might hold us in low esteem

a. how much do we yearn to join our denominational world in their unity in doctrinal diversity lovefest, ignoring our contradictory beliefs and magnifying a fleeting sense of union in spite of them, pretending that Jesus loves it all equally

b. how the false teacher among us will speak great swelling words that promise to end the conflict and usher in a new era of cooperation and warmth (Second Peter 2:12-18)

c. compromise with denominational or moral error will always make you more acceptable to impenitent sinners, but less acceptable to a Holy God (First Peter 1:13-16)

d. this is why we are instructed to hold fast to truth, make no provision for the devil and quit ye like men

D. Overcoming

1. it is time to renew our plea: Back to the Bible!

2. give me book, chapter and verse!

3. we neglect to eat the hidden manna when we refuse to preach on controversial subjects, for man does not live on bread alone, but every word that proceeds from the mouth of God

4. we cease to deserve a white stone, for we become guilty of sin when we compromise with its teachers (Second Timothy 2:14-19)

Conclusion

Pergamos was a church of subtle compromise, a group that pretended to see and hear no evil, lest they be disturbed enough to reject it and risk the disapproval of the world. Let us rise above that and be strong and faithful.

Revelation (7): Thyatira church of Christ

(Revelation 2:18-29)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The Lord's missive to our ancient brethren in Thyatira takes its place in the imagery-laden, but deeply instructive, second chapter of the Book of Revelation. It has been said that these seven letters represent the conditions, rises and falls of churches everywhere and in every time; perhaps there are valuable lessons to be gleaned from the words of Christ for this church today as well. Thyatira was a church corrupted by moral error and false teaching. In a day in which the church is under attack by compromisers, the letter to Thyatira just might hit home.

Discussion

I. About Thyatira

A. The City of Thyatira

1. Thyatira was located about 40 miles southeast of Pergamos and was probably a military outpost when settled

2. she was an idolatrous city in which one's livelihood often depended upon a willingness to go along with the course of things and submit to popular opinion

a. the trade guilds sponsored pagan feasts, serving meat from the idol's altar and conducting immoral fertility rituals

b. the Christian probably felt real pressure to participate, because to refuse would lead to ostracism in the marketplace

B. The Church at Thyatira

1. the earliest mention of the gospel reaching Thyatira finds a Thyatiran actually coming to it instead (Acts 16:11-15)

2. whether Paul traveled to Thyatira to evangelize while residing in Ephesus (see Acts 19:1-10), we are unsure; perhaps Lydia brought the truth back with her and another preacher built upon Paul's foundation

3. whatever the case is, a church had been established there and was now under attack by the devil

II. The Text (Revelation 2:18-29)

A. I Know ...

1. our Lord identifies himself as the son of God with eyes like fire and feet as of fine brass; his vision is not impaired by the pretenses of men and his might is not threatened by the burning of temptation on idol's altars

2. he stands upon those brass feet in the midst of the churches and turns his fiery gaze upon Thyatira to announce that he knows her record-her works, her love, her service, her faith and her patience

3. interestingly, he notes that, as for her works, the last are more than the first

a. could it be that she has visibly increased her efforts at doing good while failing to grow much in other areas?

b. if the letter stopped here, Thyatira would appear to be in great shape

4. all of these are qualities we wish to develop individually and collectively, but it is possible for a church to have them all and still be drifting in another way

B. Jezebel

1. the Thyatira church was drifting into moral compromise because the social pressure was so great and a voice within the body was leading the call for lowered standards of behavior

2. like Balaam before, the name of Jezebel is resurrected from the Old Testament and recycled here so that Bible students like those in first century Asia Minor and those sitting here tonight might understand

a. these names are a warm up for the litany of recycled, and more obscure, imagery that will follow in the Revelation

b. Jezebel was the wicked wife of King Ahab who convinced him to execute all sorts of evil

plots-she persuaded him to take Naboth's vineyard and to threaten Elijah (First Kings 21:25-26)

c. in the present context, some influential woman perhaps taught the persecuted and wavering Christian that he could join the guild and participate in its immoral feasts without forfeiting the faith in his heart of hearts

d. since the idol was nothing, the Christian could participate although he was leaving others with the distinct impression that he did believe in it

3. what a relief this doctrine was to a church that had always figured they had to go the hard road and refuse such things, risking their jobs and social standing as well as their lives; unfortunately, it was a lie

4. what made things worse was that Thyatira tolerated Jezebel to teach her error; faithful elders and saints will fight against error, but this church allowed it

C. Time To Repent

1. this Jezebel was afforded time to repent, but she used God's patience as an opportunity to feel vindicated and emboldened in her proclamations

2. the blind teacher was leading the blinded follower into an eternal ditch and unless repentance intervened, both teacher and taught would enter tribulation together

3. when our Lord looked down at that Christian at the idol feast, he did not see a saint walking a fine line of faith in a faithless world, but a wayward believer slowly crippling his ability to resist worldliness and influence others for righteousness

D. Power Over Nations

1. many in Thyatira were the silent majority who knew the doctrines of Jezebel were false, but felt afraid or indifferent toward opposing it openly

a. they were chastened for that error in verse 20 and are now told simply to hold fast to the truth until the end

b. the followers of Jezebel had discovered the depths of Satan, having fallen prey to the allure of compromise or the old axiom, "you never know until you try it"

2. those who overcome until the end are promised power over the nations

a. as faithful Christians, we reign with Christ in his kingdom (Romans 5:17)

b. as rewarded Christians in that last day, we rise in victory even as unbelievers are afflicted with the second death (Psalm 2:7-9)

c. in the day of judgment, those who mocked us and scorned our convictions will bow before Jesus and emit cries of apology toward us as well, but too late and in vain to alter their fates

3. the gift of the morning star is a promise of Christ's presence itself, as the darkness before the dawn is interrupted by a glimmer of light

III. Applications

A. More Than The First

1. if Jesus could look into Thyatira, he can surely look into this church as well, and know through flaming eyes and upon brass feet, the condition of this group and each individual within it

2. great importance is attached to the fact that their works had actually increased, but pious works alone will not save a man's soul (Matthew 7:21-23)

3. we ought to be increasing in love, service, faith, patience and works (Second Peter 1:2-11)

a. when before we were unmoved by human suffering, now we are spurred to action

b. when before we tended to serve self first, we now look to see who around us requires attention more

c. when before our faith was pushed to the edge of oblivion by the slightest inconvenience, we now stand firm even in a storm of trial

B. Jezebels

1. there are Jezebels among us today, and not a few Ahabs as well

a. Jezebel was used figuratively of a woman who advised pragmatism and compromise in the war with the ways of this world

b. instead of striving for purity, she sought to protect only a tiny portion of truth inside a cloak of immorality

c. Jezebel took the "go along to get along" mentality to a dark conclusion and the spiritual

purity of the saints was destroyed unwittingly

2. we are not permitted the convenience of integrating worldly trends into our faith (First Peter 1:13-19)

a. we could all get along so much easier if we could integrate liberal trends on divorce and remarriage, immodest dress and behavior and contemporary worship into our faith, making it at once more palatable to seekers and less demanding to members

b. but then this faith would cease to be the faith of Jesus and become the faith of man

c. Jezebel does not love the ways of the world but she is willing to accommodate them to avoid having to take a stand and when you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything

3. when our livelihood or social standing is threatened by our convictions, it is not time to get new convictions, but new determination to sacrifice it all at the cross of Christ if required (Mark 10:26-31)

4. friendship with the world is enmity with God (Second Corinthians 6:14-18; see also James 4:4)

C. Time To Repent

1. as Jesus grants his brethren time to repent, so must we grant one another the same opportunity and yet the very phrase indicates that this period is of limited duration

2. even our God's patience eventually expires, lest it be confused with tolerance (Romans 2:1-11)

a. eventually, the disorderly saint must be withdrawn from (Second Thessalonians 3:6, 15)

b. the false teacher must be marked and shunned (Romans 16:17-19)

c. the follower of Jezebel must be delivered to Satan (First Corinthians 5:1-6)

d. the factious must be identified (Titus 3:10-11)

3. allowing Jezebels and assorted other ne'er-do-wells to dwell in fellowship with the righteous will influence them for evil and tell the world and others that iniquity is winked at in the church of Christ

D. Power Over Nations

1. it is easy to get excited over the promise of power over nations, imagining that maybe you will get to be king of France in Judgment Day

2. that misses the point, for we reign now with Christ and will enjoy an honored place in the judgment, but one much better than Paris or London

3. we will surround the throne of heaven while infidels become food for worms

4. the morning star is the light within us, that guides us and restores us unless we make a deal with the devil (First John 1:5-7)

Conclusion

The letter to Thyatira is a warning to every church in this beleaguered age in which truth seems to be negotiated every day to avoid conflict.

Revelation (8): Sardis church of Christ

(Revelation 3:1-6)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The fifth letter of Christ to the churches of Asia Minor is directed specifically to the saints at Sardis. What kind of church was Sardis; does this congregation bear any resemblance to her at all, obliging us to heed her warnings or reap her rewards? In a book filled with vibrant symbolism, these seven letters use theirs in a manner clearly practical for churches of every age. The church at Sardis will forever be known as one that had ceased to merit its reputation. Let her ever be a warning to any eldership or membership that has settled into complacency through the laurels of the past.

Discussion

I. About Sardis

A. The City of Sardis

1. Sardis was located about 30 miles southeast of Thyatira where five important roads joined to form an important trading center
 - a. so noted for trade was Sardis that she is considered the birthplace of modern money for there the first coins were minted
 - b. yet as one might guess this level of prosperity led many into a state of luxury and decadence
2. in addition, Sardis was a militarily secure city, founded, like Edom, in the insurmountable mountains
 - a. still confidence like this can become overconfidence and Sardis had found herself invaded and defeated before
 - b. but that was long ago and the people of Sardis had forgotten their history
 - c. perhaps this overconfident attitude had infected the Christians as well

B. The Church at Sardis

1. nothing at all is known about the establishment or early history of the church; perhaps Paul labored there while he lived at Ephesus (see Acts 19:10)
2. what we can discern comes from this letter; we know that Sardis was once a thriving and busy congregation

II. The Text (Revelation 3:1-6)

A. I Know ...

1. still again, like all the other letters, Jesus reminds his immediate audience that he knows them and their works
 - a. how soothing it is to think that the evil deeds we commit in secret are unseen by man or God and yet such is merely self-delusion and spiritual poison
 - b. better to understand that, although men may continue to be ignorant of our secrets, all things are naked and open to our creator and judge
2. Jesus knows that the reputation of this church had long ago ceased to reflect its current direction
 - a. unlike the other churches, neither persecution nor heresy are mentioned as troubling this congregation
 - b. instead, she is afflicted with complacency—a sense that her past works merit a period of rest on Earth
3. Sardis has a name that she is alive, but in fact, she is dead
 - a. she was still conducting worship services, but attempts at evangelism had ground to a halt, perhaps due to more pressing concerns like trade
 - b. efforts to shine a light into the dark places of Sardis had been curtailed as the church's pulse grew fainter
 - c. that sense of security that came from living on a hill made it difficult for Sardis to feel motivated and urgent about their gospel responsibilities

B. The Three R's

1. the three R's in education are readin', 'ritin' and 'rithmetic; in the letter to Sardis, they are reviving, restoring and repenting
2. the very first thing Sardis is instructed to do to this end is to become watchful
 - a. that fortified city, thus far free from persecution, heresy and emperor worship enforcement and blessed with material wealth was vulnerable, if only because history teaches that complacency and overconfidence are signs of pride that go before a fall
 - b. yet it was not enemy soldiers they needed to be most concerned about; their enemy was already within the camp
 - c. these saints needed to become observant of his devices and begin fighting diligently against them
 - d. besides, the heresy on the next hill will eventually try to spread onto yours
3. Jesus counsels them to strengthen the things that remain, but are ready to die, like we would try to save an injured animal or nurture a bug-bitten plant
 - a. not for the sake of nostalgia, they are told to remember how they received the gospel, so that they could see how little they were making of it lately
 - b. some might assume that doing nothing is safe, that it is neither good nor bad, but Jesus tells these do-nothings to repent of their malaise and return to work

C. The Place of Reformers

1. when we, as members, see the congregation drifting, we may be tempted to jump ship immediately, but that is too quick a response and not the correct one
2. Sardis contained a few members that had not fallen into the sin of complacency, but were still worthy of honor
3. instead of giving up on Sardis, they were attempting to keep their own faithfulness and inspire the rest as well
 - a. there comes a point at which such an effort is proven fruitless and the faithful may be forced to worship with a church that is still sound elsewhere
 - b. but first effort should be made at reform

D. Walking In White

1. the promise Jesus makes to the faithful sounds twofold, but it merely refers to the same perfect, inestimable blessing pronounced before
2. he who overcomes will be clothed in white garments
 - a. the Romans had a custom that on days of military triumph, the nobles would march through the city arrayed in white
 - b. few Christians were ever noble enough on Earth to join the procession, but a holy lifestyle will make us fit to walk in the Messiah's victory parade down streets of gold
3. secondly, their names will remain in the book of life as a confession by Christ of their faithfulness
 - a. this book is the divinely kept register of God's disciples, referred to as early as Moses's trip to Mt. Sinai (see Exodus 32:32-33)
 - b. we learn that getting one's name inscribed there does not necessarily mean it will remain; unfaithfulness like that in Sardis provokes God's eraser

III. Applications

A. A Name That You Are Alive

1. churches never begin in a state of complacency; they start on fire for the Lord and the work at hand
 - a. they generally grow, both in number and in determination, as long as this is true
 - b. yet often, at some point, somebody gets satisfied with the increase God has already given and the effort begins to tail off
2. the congregation's reputation, formed in the past, becomes undeserved
 - a. they have a name in the phone book, on the meeting house wall and even in church directories, that they are alive, but they are effectively dead
 - b. they are keeping house for the Lord, when in fact, they could be turning the world upside down with the gospel, if they cared anymore
 - c. and both the eldership and the membership are accountable, for shepherds stop directing the

flock forward and the sheep get used to lethargy (Second Thessalonians 3:11-13)

3. Jesus is coming like a thief in the night and the day of work will reach its inevitable sunset; will we already be on the porch with our feet up or will he find us still bringing in the sheaves? (Galatians 6:6-10)

a. while we are praying for laborers to harvest that white field, we might also pick up our own sickles

b. the same thing said of Sardis can be true of this church, collectively, and of members, individually; the church might stay alive while you die spiritually

B. Revive, Restore and Repent

1. hungry people do not lose their zeal for food and so when Christians get their fill of whatever they expected out of their faith, they can lose their zeal over time

2. as we examine ourselves, it is imperative that we be honest and dissatisfied with a lack of effort; we must revive, restore and repent

a. we don't want to be stirred up by heresy or persecution, but we must be stirred up by the word (Second Peter 1:12-21)

b. this is still a God-given word we are handling and both perfect blessing and grave warning are attached to it

c. it is still the grace of a loving father through a selfless son to a sinful world that once saved us and will save others

3. if a man pushed you out of the way of a runaway car today, saving your life, would you ever forget it or take another day for granted?

a. perhaps you would, but Christ did that and more

b. we need to be stirred up by the urgency of the gospel cure for a world dying around us day in and day out (Titus 2:11-14)

C. The Place of Reformers

1. we often judge the soundness of a congregation only by the doctrine that is taught there, but soundness depends also on the complete health of the church

a. is it teaching truth and practicing it, for you see, medicine in principle only heals theoretically; only in practice does it actually cure anything

b. the health of a church depends also upon its commitment to its mission to evangelize its community

2. you may find a church that is unsound in doctrine or effort or impartial application

a. stay while you can, try to inspire others to be sound, challenge the symptoms of unsoundness that you find

b. if after all that, the church refuses to turn around, you may depart

c. do not abandon the group before you try; God's people are worth the effort

3. God will not hold you accountable while you work for reform until you decide to go along with it to get along with it (Titus 1:10-14)

D. Walking In White

1. the parade of nobles arrayed in white is our march into heaven on the day that Jesus returns to lead us home and the book of life is opened to reveal our names

2. our place there is his confession of our fitness for eternity (Matthew 10:27-33)

3. clearly, names can be blotted out just as they were first inscribed

a. an eraser hung over the heads of many in Sardis who were guilty more of sins of omission than commission

b. if that is also true of you today, understand that lethargy is as offensive to God as great diligence in wrongdoing; your garments are soiled by the grass stains of your recline; get up!

Conclusion

Let us strive to avoid the characterization that plagued Sardis, being either saints or a church with a reputation for life but a reality of death. Let us be constantly revived.

Revelation (9): Philadelphia church of Christ

(Revelation 3:7-13)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The sixth letter of Revelation is addressed to the Philadelphia church of Christ and is distinguished as one of just two that are full of commendation without a word of rebuke. The blessing promised here, however, seems even to exceed that which was communicated to Smyrna, for they would be kept from much of the persecution that was yet to befall their brethren elsewhere in Asia Minor. Let us remember once more that these letters were written a little more than 1900 years ago and were delivered to Christians suffering daily from the specter of persecution. When Jesus speaks of great tribulation, he has in mind theirs in that age, not some future period that would befall us or a successive generation. We rob our ancient brethren of their comfort when we presume to take their letter and leave little application to them, since we want to claim the tribulation for ourselves. Philadelphia is a church of brotherly love, but more importantly, one of proven perseverance.

Discussion

I. About Philadelphia

A. The City of Philadelphia

1. 28 miles southeast of Sardis was the ancient city of Philadelphia, a missionary city in the sense that it was built to proselytize the world in the Greek language and culture
2. Philadelphia, of course, means "brotherly love" in Greek and the city was named for the loyalty that Attalus II showed to his own brother
3. the city was located strategically on one of the Roman empire's most important highways, but was also in an area prone to earthquakes; one such event destroyed the city in 17 A.D. and was followed by years of tremors that kept the residents in constant fear of a repeat catastrophe

B. The Church at Philadelphia

1. outside of this letter, the church at Philadelphia is not mentioned anywhere in scripture
2. we know nothing more than that the church there was quite sound

II. The Text (Revelation 3:7-13)

A. The Key Holder

1. Jesus identifies himself in this sixth letter as holy and true, the doorkeeper of David
2. the greatest enemy of true religion is not found outside of its borders, but is instead the occasional hypocrisy of its adherents
 - a. whether through the one extreme of weakness or the other of misguided zeal, when Christians violate the doctrines they claim to hold dear, the faith is opened up for ridicule
 - b. Jesus, therefore, names himself holy and true to continue his warning against hypocrisy within his discipleship
 - c. he finds such hypocrisy among the stubborn Jews and does not want to find it among his followers
 - d. being holy and true means simply practicing what one preaches, giving in neither to weakness nor misguided zeal
3. Jesus, the holder of the key of David, defines himself as authoritative
 - a. he is the one lawgiver for the church and holds all authority in heaven and Earth
 - b. from the death of Zedekiah until the first century, God's people waited for the seed of David to sit upon his throne over the divine kingdom and Jesus was the one who claimed the throne by ascending into heaven to assume it (see Acts 2:29-33)
4. the holy and true doorkeeper then is empowered to determine the eternal fates of mankind, both his brethren and his enemies

B. I Know ...

1. again, as in each of the other letters, Jesus reminds his readers that he knows them
2. what a relief and reward it must be to learn that Jesus knows your works and approves of them;

that is what makes a church sound

3. this cultural missionary city was presented with an open door of opportunity to spread the gospel message and she was taking advantage of it, despite the fact that the church had but little strength
 - a. how often do we forgo opportunities before us because we reason our little strength will prevent us from accomplishing anything big?
 - b. but Jesus does not require us to do something big, just that we do something commensurate with our ability
4. Jesus knows that their actions have been in keeping with his word and have never denied his name
 - a. many big works have to go beyond Christ's word to get done and many of them have to hide Christ's name to sneak the gospel in later when people do not expect it
 - b. such big "brotherhood works" usually devolve away from scripture as time continues

C. Synagogue of Satan

1. the holy and true one turns his attention back to the hypocrites, the synagogue of Satan who claim to be Jews but are not
2. these men and women were Jews by birth, but not by faith, for they rejected the Messiah and therefore Jehovah
3. persecuting those who did believe made them servants of Satan and rejecting the message of the Holy Spirit made them blasphemers, but they would not prevail
4. it is possible to make religious claims without accuracy because hypocrisy will always find us out

D. Hour of Trial

1. a period of trial was to engulf the entire world, as is apparent from the whole series of letters, not in the distant future, but the near term to these readers
2. the promise of Jesus is to keep them faithful through its darkest moments as the Roman caesars increase their pressure on Christians to honor them as deities
3. that hour of trial has passed, for it applied to the early Christians and they endured; this prophecy was fulfilled long ago

E. Overcoming

1. the crown of life they were set to wear in eternity was at stake when Rome pressed the saints to worship two gods; apostasy was possible for those willing to deny Christ and compromise with Caesar
2. those who overcame the threats to their bodies, families and livelihoods would be amply rewarded beyond the grave
 - a. in ancient times, an outstanding servant who had died was honored with an inscription upon a pillar in the temple of his god; borrowing the symbolism, Jesus promises a position of reward and honor in his pure temple
 - b. an equally symbolic inscription upon the faithful would show his allegiance to Christ, his place as a child of God and his habitation in heaven

III. Applications

A. The Doorkeeper

1. one may read this letter and take rather for granted Christ's description of himself in authority, but one does so at great personal risk
2. his authority was won through great hardship and his redeemed can not take it lightly without trampling upon him (Hebrews 5:5-9)
 - a. we must remember that the church into which the redeemed are placed is his, not ours, and as such, it is to be directed by his mind not our whims
 - b. so many things that men do, supposedly in his name, and that which they leave undone, show ignorance or carelessness for his authority (Matthew 28:18-20)
3. we see men adopting worship practices from the Old Testament, absent from the new, without ever considering the authority of Christ
 - a. the mount of transfiguration should have cured this weakness (Matthew 17:1-8)
 - b. Peter catches a lot of flak over this, but pat him on the back for having the intelligence to ask before he starting cutting timber ("If you wish, let us make ...")

4. on the day of Pentecost, Peter saw Jesus sitting on the throne of David, unoccupied for 500 years and now filled forever by the son of David (Acts 2:29-36)
 - a. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, the blessed and only Potentate (see First Timothy 6:15)
 - b. we can not disobey, disregard, dismiss or disdain his will without marring our discipleship and turning it into something purely self-serving (Luke 6:46-49)
 - c. this faith is his and so is this church and without clear New Testament mandate, we cannot take it anywhere that the apostles could not

B. I Know You

1. through our own conversions, the availability of Bibles, our own personal talents and a myriad of other gifts, God has opened doors of opportunity for us and he will hold us accountable for whether we seize the moment or let it pass (Matthew 25:14-30)
2. how much better to understand that Jesus knows our works and will not err in pronouncing us good and faithful servants or unprofitable, lazy ones
3. we must not pass off small deeds in waiting for big ones, for every opportunity is important (Matthew 25:31-46)

C. Church of Satan

1. in that age, there were people who called themselves Jews even while persecuting the son of God and assaulting the church; Jesus calls them the synagogue of Satan after the place where they met to worship without spirit or truth
2. in this age, there are people who call themselves Christians who through hypocritical living are nothing more than a church of Satan (Romans 2:28-29)
 - a. as Jesus warned about the Pharisees, they are the ones who preach well, but practice poorly (see Matthew 23:1-4)
 - b. they are the double-minded (James 1:21-25)
 - c. "They profess to know God, but in works they deny him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work" (Titus 1:16).
3. hypocrisy, through weakly indulging damnable appetites, or resorting to sin by misguided zeal, gives the adversary cause to accuse the faith of wickedness
 - a. when the saints are defrocked for participating in the same sins they verbally condemned, they become a church of Satan
 - b. when the saints resort to lies and even murder to further their cause, they are exposed as frauds

D. Overcoming the Hour of Trial

1. Premillennialists will take the hour of trial impending upon the first century saints and apply it to our age, but that is like selfish thievery
 - a. the hour of trial that Jesus warned about occurred as the Caesars persecuted the church throughout the world
 - b. we need not expect any other great tribulation period as we wait for the return of Christ, for none is predicted
 - c. all hours of trial in the gospels and here referred either to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. or the Roman persecution in the second and third centuries
2. our trials are less severe than theirs, but sadly, our strength is littler as well
 - a. "Therefore, let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (First Corinthians 10:12)
 - b. if we are going to be more than conquerors when it comes to the temptations that befall us, we are going to have to rediscover the source of strength that enabled these brethren to survive threats to their very lives (Romans 8:35-39)
 1. trust in bank accounts, pension plans and present conditions will not get it done
 2. we must turn back to the love of God and find a place in his arms
3. all who overcome will wear that new name for eternity in the city of God

Conclusion

The letter to Philadelphia reminds us of the good we are capable of producing when we choose to

persevere and lean on Jesus for strength.

Revelation (10): Laodicea church of Christ

(Revelation 3:14-22)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Seven is the number symbolic of completeness. Even the ninth chapter of Proverbs speaks of the seven pillars of wisdom to illustrate the firm foundation and not the finite number. Perhaps these seven churches among those in Asia Minor were chosen because in concert they well illustrated the conditions of all churches at one time or another. Certainly, in these seven letters, we can find promise and warning somewhere for this local church. The final letter of Christ is addressed to the church at Laodicea and she is without doubt the sorriest of the five who received rebuke from Jesus. Unlike the others, she receives absolutely no commendation whatsoever. Laodicea is forever recalled as the nauseatingly lukewarm congregation and yet even she was being given time to repent and be restored.

Discussion

I. About Laodicea

A. The City of Laodicea

1. continuing our circuit around Asia Minor, we travel 40 miles southeast from Philadelphia and arrive at the Lycus valley and the intersection to two major trade routes, the city of Laodicea
2. under the Roman empire, Laodicea became the richest of the cities of Phrygia, so well off that even a devastating earthquake in 60 A.D. did not require federal assistance to rebuild
 - a. Laodicea was the banking center of Asia Minor with its vaults filled with gold
 - b. she was also a center of the ancient garment industry, famous for the dark wool woven from black sheep grazing in her countryside
 - c. Laodicea had a notable medical school in her borders where medicines such as the Phrygian eye powder were produced and exported to the rest of the world
3. the city did have one glaring weakness: the lack of an adequate source of fresh, potable water; one archaeologist reasons that her water was delivered via aqueduct from the hot springs to the south and thus was not naturally cool and refreshing, but lukewarm and somewhat bitter

B. The Church at Laodicea

1. the elements then of prosperity and self-sufficiency defined the pride of Laodicea and apparently infected the saints in town as well
2. decades earlier, she was mentioned in the Colossian letter of the apostle Paul (see Colossians 4:13, 16), but other than the fact that a church then existed there, nothing more is revealed
3. this letter in Revelation 3, however, reveals enough to paint a sad picture of the church in Laodicea; a tepid attitude toward spiritual things had been allowed to take over and no fire remained to sustain the church against hard times

II. The Text (Revelation 3:14-22)

A. I Know Your Works

1. Jesus completes the pattern of telling each of seven churches that he knows their works, reminding them and us of his omniscience, even into things that we consider concealed from every other human
2. Jesus calls himself "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God"
 - a. we are in the habit of saying, "Amen" to conclude our prayers and to indicate personal commitment to the things that were said, but Jesus *is* the Amen; he is the certainty of revealed truth and divine promises and even these warnings
 - b. he is a faithful and true witness for he observes and reports with perfect integrity; when he warns a church that it is in danger, no one should doubt him
 - c. lastly, Jesus is the creative force behind all the things in which the Laodiceans trusted (Colossians 1:15-17)
3. what Jesus knows about their works is that they reflect a lukewarm attitude toward matters of the faith

- a. everything is no big deal, let someone else do it, turn a blind eye, it an wait until tomorrow
- b. the Laodiceans had lost their fire and the result was a group of people so uncommitted and going through the motions of playing church that Jesus was nauseated by them to the point of threatening to vomit them out of his fellowship

B. Perception Is Not Always Reality and The Difference Matters

- 1. we hear that phrase "perception is reality" bandied about an awful lot these days to indicate that a person's perception of things is his reality
 - a. that may be so, but it does not alter what reality really is and it will not be an acceptable excuse in the day of judgment either
 - b. God has given us a spirit of power, love and a sound mind and a sound mind is equipped to distinguish between truth and fiction
- 2. the Laodiceans' perception of their condition found self-sufficiency, prosperity and certain glory to come
 - a. their reality was desperate need, poverty and certain damnation on the horizon
 - b. although they perceived themselves to be above humiliation, Jesus saw them as weak and naked, because their focus had so shifted to materialism
- 3. that was genuine reality and the sooner they awoke to it, the better

C. Buy Christ's Gold, White Robes and Eye Salve

- 1. the Laodiceans had come to trust as much in the gold in their vaults as their unbelieving neighbors did; they boasted as much in the wealth created in the garment district as the town fathers and the advances of their medical school made them feel secure against every ailment
- 2. but gold has no bartering power in heaven and the blackest wool would be hideously out of place among the righteous in their robes; their eye salve only treated physical vision, not the spiritual sight which they lost
- 3. and so Jesus offered to sell them gold which thieves cannot break in and steal, white robes of penitence and faith and salve to clarify their spiritual vision, but the price was the idols they would have to give up

D. As Many As I Love, I Rebuke and Chasten

- 1. many would suppose it to be love if Jesus would simply look the other way when his people drift into sin and not cause them consternation by reproof
- 2. Jesus says that he always rebukes those he loves when they need it, and when they need it is when they are developing attitudes or practices that defy the faith delivered once for all
- 3. rebuke motivated by genuine love of the soul of another should always be perceived as a blessing and not an invitation to war

E. Be Zealous and Repent

- 1. Jesus closes the letter by showing himself standing at the door and knocking, desiring to enjoy rich association again with the church in Laodicea
- 2. but it depended upon their decision to ask him in, not with easy words, but hard determination to renew their earlier zeal and turn away from their apathy
- 3. beyond earthly fellowship, he promises eternal glory worth far more than all the gold in all the vaults of Laodicea or the world

III. Some Applications

A. Jesus Knows Your Works

- 1. it is easy to read the gospel accounts of the life of Christ and laugh just a little as Jesus reads the minds of his enemies and exposes the wicked plots and sinister motives they thought they held so carefully
- 2. but what if Jesus were to walk into your home or workplace or classroom or this building and reveal your thoughts to you and those within earshot?
- 3. he has always had the power to know you better than you know yourself and to read your thoughts and catalog both your works and their motivation
 - a. if Jesus knows our works, then we should know them as well, for some works appear to be good, but are not (Matthew 7:21-23)

- b. some works are good, but the motivation ruins them (First Corinthians 13:1-3)
- c. and some works are good, but the method ruins them (Colossians 3:22-24)

B. Align Your Perception to Reality

1. the way you perceive your standing before God may be based on many things and many of them may be acts of self-delusion
 - a. some seek to justify themselves by general acts of goodness, apart from true faith or they reason themselves into heaven against the better advice of scripture
 - b. some lie to themselves so long that they begin to believe the lie and they are practically doomed to remain in it until death and truth come together (Second Thessalonians 2:9-12)
2. there is no better time than the present for a reality check (Second Corinthians 13:5)
 - a. before you find duty or distraction in judging others (Matthew 7:1-5)
 - b. some of the wealthiest men on Earth are poor and do not know it; you may be like them if your faith has grown cold

C. Buy The Truth and Sell It Not

1. wisdom of old tells us to "buy the truth and sell it not" and Jesus assures us that truth is a pearl of great price for which a discerning man will exchange all that he has
2. although you may have a healthy bank account and designer clothes and feel self-sufficient, the pearl of great price is not purchased with dollars and cents, but faith and submission (Mark 8:34-38)
3. so many trust in riches to the starvation of their souls or place enough importance upon them that they never truly learn to lean on Jesus and count all things but rubbish

D. Rebuke A Wise Man and He Will Love You

1. when someone rebukes us out of genuine concern for our souls, we should not be embarrassed and humiliated and enraged (Proverbs 9:7-9)
2. God promises to chasten us as children because he loves his imperfect creatures and knows that a little leaven leavens the whole lump; what seems like a small indiscretion just may lead to total apostasy and quicker than you think
3. the Laodiceans' rebuke was spread throughout Asia Minor and now the whole world for 1900 years, so what do you have to complain about?
4. accept the rebuke, judge yourself honestly and then act upon what you find, not like the rich young ruler who went away sorrowful because following Christ would mean giving up his many possessions

E. Be Zealous And Repent

1. we tell people to "get better" when they are sick as if there is something they can do to improve their weakened health
 - a. well, there is; they can take medicine, follow doctor's orders and focus their prayerful minds on overcoming what ails them
 - b. Jesus says simply, "be zealous," because people can turn over new leaves and make up their minds to take their chastening, follow New Testament orders and focus themselves upon overcoming their apathy through renewed diligence
2. fellowship with Jesus and eternal reward depend upon the lukewarm Christian rededicating himself to being about his father's business instead of fooling around in the devil's workshop

Conclusion

Like the Laodiceans, we are sometimes tempted by the prosperity of our society to feel self-sufficient and in need of nothing. It becomes time for us to go back to the earliest days of our walk with Christ and give our idols up for good.

Revelation (II): Throne Room of Heaven

(Revelation 4:1-11)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The seven letters completed, Jesus now turns to the continuation of the Revelation. Remember, however, that the entire book is primarily addressed to those same saints of first century Asia Minor, and its immediate impact would be upon their lives. The book's chief benefit to modern readers is not in the prediction of future events, but in the comfort of knowing that God secures his people in every tribulation, whether it be the deluge of Noah's time, the incineration of Sodom and Gomorrah or the pilgrimage out of Egypt. The fourth chapter of Revelation offers a rare glimpse inside the throne room of heaven and the opportunity to comprehend anew that our King is firmly ensconced upon the seat of David over his kingdom, the church. There, he remains concerned with the affairs of this world and his redeemed are never far from his care (Revelation 4:1-11).

Discussion

I. A Throne Set In Heaven (see Revelation 4:1-5)

A. An Open Door

1. there is nothing so inviting to curious men as an open door and here it is a rare invitation from God for a man to look inside and see what goes on beyond the clouds in Heaven
2. lest the open door be too foreboding, a voice like a trumpet personally invites John to come up and see what things God had planned for his people in the days to come
3. only a few other mortals have come so close to God
 - a. Moses was convinced of God's abiding presence as Israel set out on its pilgrimage through many battles on the way to the promised land (Exodus 33:18-23)
 - b. Elijah was encouraged to carry on despite the deepest depression and pessimism of his life in the face of bitter persecution (First Kings 19:1-13)
 - c. Stephen was strengthened to die honorably at the hands of Jewish persecutors as rocks were hurled in his direction (Acts 7:51-60)
 - d. Paul was convinced of the all-sufficiency of God's grace (Second Corinthians 12:1-10)
4. John joins their elite company as an aged apostle, but with a mission to share the account of his experiences with all the persecuted saints in his world

B. Things Which Must Take Place

1. here again is the moral imperative intrinsic to the word "must," especially when it is attached to the consolation of the troubled saints of Domitian's pagan realm
2. God is about to foretell eventual victory in spite of initial deterioration in conditions and the need for great perseverance (Psalm 46:1-6)
3. such persecution as theirs was not a surprise to our Lord; the apostles had been scattered at the crucifixion and the disciples in Jerusalem were scattered by the martyrdom of Stephen
4. yet still the faithful remained faithful; Jesus said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33)

C. The Throne

1. like Paul before him, John is transported in the spirit so that he can see into heaven and immediately his eyes are drawn to its throne
 - a. an empty throne would be cause of consternation, confusion and fear, for perhaps the king has been slain or overthrown
 - b. this throne is occupied, however, and magnificently so; neither the devil nor Domitian have assumed control of the affairs of humankind
2. the figurative nature of the imagery is clear here, as it should be throughout the book
 - a. God is not literally made of jasper and sardius stones, but his appearance is so awesome that it seems as like the blazing glory of the clear jasper and crimson sardius are before him
 - b. the crystal clarity of the jasper seem to represent God's holiness and purity while the fiery red sardius would indicate his penalizing justice; God is holy (see First Peter 1:16), but he is also a

consuming fire (see Hebrews 12:29)

3. a green halo shone around the throne, a rainbow set there by God after the flood as a reminder that he would never again destroy the Earth with water

a. to succeeding generations, the rainbow has been a reminder of judgment and a promise of hope

b. even today, the sight of a rainbow shows the passage of the storm and the return of the sun

4. the actual identity of the 24 elders seated around the throne is never told, but in a book of figures and symbols, that is hardly surprising

a. the most logical explanation is that the 24 represent both fleshly Israel and spiritual Israel through the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles

b. Christ's sacrifice looked to the present and the future, but also to the past to find and sanctify the faithful of every age (Hebrews 9:13-15)

c. their white robes are made of spiritual purity and their golden crowns are the reward of a life lived by faith and not by sight, permitting them now to reign with Jesus

5. just as when Moses climbed Mt. Sinai to meet God and his awesome presence was signified with a cacophony of sound, so here John is startled by thunder, lightning and voices proceeding from the throne

6. Jesus has not yet reappeared since punctuating the letter to Laodicea, but now the Holy Spirit does, signified by the burning lamps like unto the illuminating power of the truths he had revealed in his mission to teach the apostles all things (see John 14:26)

II. Four Living Creatures (see Revelation 4:6-11)

A. Sea of Glass

1. much later in the Revelation, the sea of glass will be removed, but in these early stages, it is there, clear as crystal and the transcendence of God

2. Jehovah remains somewhat separated from his children while life and death continue on Earth; only the final judgment can eliminate this division and unite man with Maker for all eternity

B. Description of the Four Creatures

1. four living creatures join the scene in the midst of the throne; each has eyes all over him front and back

2. the first one John sees is like a lion, the second like a calf, the third like a man and the fourth like a flying eagle

3. were this literal, the image would be terrifying rather than reassuring

a. pagan Romans like Domitian and his minions would think this passage a bunch of silly fiction, but to the student of the Hebrew Bible, it has a very real, but completely figurative meaning

b. the imagery is recycled from the first chapter of Ezekiel, where similarly described creatures are later identified as cherubim (see Ezekiel 10:20)

1. cherubim guarded the abandoned Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:24) and were represented upon the two ends of the ark of the covenant as covering the mercy seat (see Exodus 25:18-22)

2. the lion, king of the jungle represents strength; the calf or ox shows devoted service; the man represents reason and intellect; the eagle signifies unfettered vision

C. The Creatures' Worship

1. John writes that the creatures do not rest day or night, but continually say, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!"

a. Isaiah's vision of Heaven upon the death of King Uzziah revealed a similar scene in which the seraphim sang "Holy, Holy, Holy" as well

b. the holiness of God was never questioned by Habakkuk even as iniquity overwhelmed his Judah and God promised swift retribution at the hands of the Chaldeans; nor should it be questioned by a generation of saints suffering at the hands of the evil Domitian or us today who sometimes are persecuted for our faith and wonder how long until Jesus parts the clouds

c. our worship of a holy God ought not be stifled by apathy or intimidation or infidelity or we will never be fit to join this heavenly chorus

2. when the creatures sing, the elders fall down before God and worship him for his eternity and glory and goodness

a. they sing, "You are worthy, O Lord,/ to receive glory and honor and power;/ For you created all things,/ and by your will they exist and were created."

b. Heaven is a place of continual worship and if you find worship a bother now, maybe heaven is not the eternity for you!

Conclusion

John has looked through the open door into heaven and revealed to us his impressions of the throne room of God and its attendant creatures and people. Where is the Lord, we might wonder. Soon he will reappear and lead his people to wider comfort and promise.

Revelation (12): Worthy Is The Lamb

(Revelation 5:1-14)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The astounding scene before John's eyes has moved very quickly since he initially entered the Spirit on the Lord's day back in chapter one. A vision of the glorified Christ had lent him some increased security in the power of God and then seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor showed him the continued insight and compassion of the Lord for his people. The fourth chapter found John in the Spirit again and looking through an open door into heaven where the majesty of the Father was magnified by the presence of the 24 elders and four cherubim singing "Holy, Holy, Holy." The fourth chapter ends on a note of glory for the Lord, but the fifth chapter opens with something missing. In this chapter, the prophecies to come in the rest of the book are described as being upon a scroll which must be opened for John's witness. Chapter five will end on the same kind of note as the one that preceded it, for worthy is the Lamb of God. [Read Revelation 5:1-14.]

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Who Is Worthy? (see Revelation 5:1-4)

1. the Father sits upon his throne in heaven, from which he had thundered forth about Jesus so long ago, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased"
2. from here he had created the world and overseen its development; from here he had nurtured the scheme of salvation and attended to the prayers of the faithful
3. now we find him still engaged with mankind by holding in his hand a scroll that promises to reveal the answers to the most pressing questions being debated in Asia Minor
 - a. four chapters of context have convinced us that John and his initial audience in the first century pleaded for answers like these, to explain the reason, duration and termination of their intense suffering and persecution
 - b. we tend to define persecution as when someone makes fun of us, but these brethren defined it as when someone threatens to kill you for not bowing before an image of the emperor of Rome
 - c. and so whatever is written on the front and back of that scroll held immediate value and answers for our brethren who lived so long ago and so far away
 - d. our interest in the contents of that scroll remains high, however, for if God can comfort them and then conquer their enemies, he can likewise console us until the day of judgment (James 5:10-11)
4. in a scene that reminds of Excalibur in spite of the fact that this one came first, a strong angel asks who will open the scroll by loosening the seven seals
 - a. as the sword was pulled from the rock by cunning and not by might, so the scroll is not opened by a mighty angel, but by someone worthy
 - b. when no one in heaven or on the Earth or under the Earth is found to be that worthy, John cries the tears of a man tantalized by the object of his desire just barely out of reach
 - c. neither patriarch nor judge nor angel nor apostle is worthy to loose the seals

B. Lion and Lamb (see Revelation 5:5-7)

1. one of the 24 elders disturbs John's painful suspense and identifies the only one worthy in all the universe to break the seals and reveal the contents of the scroll
2. it is the lion of Judah, the root of David, who has prevailed
 - a. the Jews always considered the lion of Judah to be a phrase with reference to the Messiah, ever since Jacob used it to bless his twelve sons before his death (Genesis 49:9-10)
 - b. "Shiloh" is understood by biblical scholars to refer to the Messiah and this passage then predicts that the savior would come when the scepter had departed from Judah
 1. the scepter was the staff of the tribe's elder which signified the sovereignty and judicial authority of God's people to excommunicate and execute wrongdoers
 2. it remained in place though both the Babylonian and Persian captivities, but was taken away when Rome appointed procurators over the Judean province around 11 A.D. and took away the Jews' judicial right over life and death

3. it is for this reason that only Pontius Pilate could condemn Jesus to death and the Sanhedrin relied upon him to exercise the authority formerly in their scepter

c. with the scepter gone, Shiloh came and the lion of Judah became a conqueror and ruler like the king of the jungle

3. Jesus is also called here the root of David, a term that would seem to contradict his claim to descend from Judah and be descended from David at the same time

a. Jesus is spiritually the root and creator of David, but physically, he is his descendant as the genealogies in Matthew and Luke reveal

b. moreover, Jesus dealt with this issue with the Pharisees (Matthew 22:41-46)

c. it is the unique position of being fully God and fully human that allows Jesus to be both the root and son of David (Jeremiah 23:5-6)

4. yet when John looks to behold the lion, he instead sees a lamb, as if it had been slain, with seven horns and seven eyes

a. messianic prophecies are being reinvigorated here to make a point with John about the all-sufficiency of Christ; he went to the cross like the lamb that Isaiah predicted (see 54:7) and he is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world that John the immerser had announced (see John 1:29)

b. his horns represent his power and authority as they do for others in passages such as Deuteronomy 33:17 and Psalm 75:10; this lamb has been given all power in heaven and on Earth (see Matthew 28:18)

c. his seven eyes show his omniscience (see Hebrews 4:13) and the function of the Holy Spirit who replaced him as a present force on Earth at his ascension

C. A New Song (see Revelation 5:8-10)

1. the 28 elders and cherubim see him take the scroll and immediately fall down to worship this conqueror who had prevailed

a. each has golden bowls of incense, which symbolize the words of the saints' prayers wafting up to God's throne, and harps to symbolize their own musical praise

b. heaven is a spiritual destination and all these material things are described for our understanding of greater, spiritual things

2. the new song that the 28 sing reveals that the Lamb was worthy because he had been slain for the redemption of mankind

3. it was his blood which purchased the church, the household of faith and home of obedient believers and formed a kingdom composed of souls from under every regime on Earth (First Peter 2:7-10)

a. the saints are a kingdom and priesthood to Jehovah, serving beneath King Jesus and as personal worshipers of his Father

b. they reign on the Earth, for they are more than conquerors of the slavery of the devil and the deadly course of this world (Romans 8:35-37)

D. Amen! (see Revelation 5:11-14)

1. the chorus grows beyond the original 28 to an innumerable host of angels and heavenly beings, all singing about the worthiness of the lamb who was slain

2. seven treasures are ascribed to Jesus who sacrificed himself upon the Roman cross and overcame death to save mankind from eternal death

3. the original 28 elders and cherubim shout out their approval of this worship scene and continue their own praise of the eternal lamb

4. a chapter that began with suspense, disappointment and tears ends with shouts of joy and hopefulness for a worthy, prevailing lamb will surely have something to say about a demonic, murderous emperor

II. Some Applications

A. Gratitude For The Sacrifice of Christ

1. I have long believed that people's penchant for making lovely jewelry and artwork out of the crucifixion of Christ made us vulnerable to forgetting about the awfulness and agony that he endure that day

a. even the finest art cannot depict the abuse done to our Lord's body and certainly not the anguish in his perfect soul; pendants are sanitized and cold attempts to memorialize the fact that life left that noble body and its blood was drained unjustly

- b. God does not command us to paint pictures or forge jewelry to remember the crucifixion anyway; he tells us to commune weekly with the lamb (First Corinthians 11:23-26)
- 2. the blood of bulls and goats was spilled under Moses to draw attention to sin, but the blood of a spotless and sinless lamb was required to blot them away
 - a. like the early saints in Asia Minor, we must face all of our challenges with the perspective of a person already snatched away from the greatest fear, that of dying in sin and going to Hell (Hebrews 2:14-15)
 - b. gratitude for his sacrifice obligates us to live for righteousness under the oversight of the shepherd of our once wayward souls (see First Peter 2:24-25)

B. Burning Incense

- 1. the burning of incense was as much a part of Old Testament worship as animal sacrifice, the Sabbath and instrumental music
- 2. it has no literal place, however, in New Testament worship, for the will of Christ is silent regarding it
- 3. here, though, incense is used figuratively to refer to the sweet aroma of faithful prayers which reach the nostrils of God who can answer them (James 5:16-18)
 - a. the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous person accomplishes much for God hears and can answer
 - b. therefore, we pray always and with both faith and fervor, burning incense every day that does not escape the notice of our God

C. The Royal Priesthood

- 1. there are some who say the kingdom had not come in the days of these early saints and that it has not even come yet, while others believe the priesthood is a specialized unit of believers, but John and Peter describe all the Christians as a royal priesthood
- 2. a royal priesthood reigns on Earth because they have overcome the wiles of the devil to become slaves of Christ (First John 2:12-17)
 - a. our worship is not accomplished through the agency of a human intermediary, but is done directly as we speak to the Father, commune with the son and share in the sword of the Holy Spirit
 - b. in fact, we are simply preparing ourselves for the continual worship service that is heaven, where the lamb faces death no more and blesses all his redeemed with the same honor

Conclusion

The fifth chapter of Revelation renews the themes of comfort and hope. Jesus has gone on before in victory and with faith, we will prevail as well. But what does the scroll say and what will happen when he breaks the seals?

Revelation (13): The Seven Seals

(Revelation 6:1-17)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Chapter five was an emotional roller coaster, not only for John who was receiving the Revelation first but also for his later audience in the persecuted churches of Asia Minor. The great hope that had risen to a steep crescendo before the throne of God in chapter four was temporarily discouraged by the absence of anyone to break the seals on God's book of future plans for the first century churches. Finally, though, the worthy Lamb—Jesus Christ, himself—stepped forward to receive worship and to break the seals. The sixth chapter sees the breaking of first six of the seven seals, with fantastic flourishes of drama and consequence. The images here should not be taken literally, for this apocalyptic message is, by definition, composed of signs and symbols. Moreover, the destruction the seals portend was to come upon the Roman world of old for these things were shortly to come to pass 1900 years ago. Their chief value to us today is not in the event-by-event prediction of our futures, but in the reassurance that God will protect and avenge his saints of every age. Predictions about the second coming of Christ can be found in First Thessalonians 4 and First Corinthians 15, where we find that Jesus will return in the clouds and summon the faithful from the grave and then off the Earth, leaving the wicked of each place to enter Hell.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Scroll

1. the scroll was introduced to John and his readers in chapter five, and all that we know about it is that it contained answers to the questions of the persecuted saints in that age, some of whom were beginning to wonder if the faith was worth it

2. only Jesus was deemed worthy to break the seals and open the scroll, for his work of ultimate self-sacrifice and redemption had returned him to the place of high esteem in Heaven upon David's throne (see Acts 2:29-33)

3. the scene in heaven which is rehearsed in chapter five renews the hope of the troubled saint, for victory is its theme

B. The Seven Seals

1. the seven seals actually are only the first of three series of seven signs of judgment; later we will find seven trumpets in chapters eight and nine and seven bowls of wrath in chapters fifteen and sixteen

2. the three series appear to describe the same effects, only in different terms and with increasing intensity

3. each of the three series begins with four items that are similar to one another and then a pair of similar things, followed by one final and unique symbol

C. The First Seal (Revelation 6:1-2)

1. the opening of the first seal is seen by John and introduced by one of the four living creatures, speaking with a thunderous voice, "Come and see."

2. the rider on the white horse wore a crown and held a bow as he went out in search of conquest
a. this image bears a strong similarity to the military prowess of the Parthian cavalryman, which could suggest his place in troubling Rome

b. but the context of the book and the Bible make it more likely that the first rider is Jesus Christ himself

c. conquest is a theme of the book and it is Jesus, his cause and his brethren who consistently do the conquering

d. in this early sign, we see the redemptive work of Christ making souls captive for truth and overwhelming the devil's power to work through sin and death

D. The Second Seal (Revelation 6:3-4)

1. the second horseman of the Apocalypse rides upon a red stallion, with the image of blood

obviously connected to him

2. the second beast summons John to look and he finds that this horseman has power to take peace from the Earth and inspire killing

a. the sword given to the second horseman is the dagger in Greek which was used by Jesus in Matthew 10:34 as he predicted that his coming would bring a sword rather than peace to many households

b. thus the second horseman symbolizes the persecution and violence that result when Christianity is taught and decisions must be made

c. our early brethren were burned as candles in Nero's garden and made to wrestle lions; they lived all their lives at the edge of a sword and the second rider simply acknowledges their plight

E. The Third Seal (Revelation 6:5-6)

1. the third seal alerts John that the third seal has been opened and he then sees a black horse being ridden by a man holding a balance in his hands

a. black symbolizes hardship, grief and mourning and the presence of the balances introduces the idea of hunger and scarcity of food

b. this famine is not so widespread to affect everything, for the oil and wine continue to flow despite the spike in prices of wheat and barley

c. most likely, this is a famine that affected one class of people, the Christians, who would refuse to join the trade guilds that would allow them to work and trade in the marketplace

2. an entire day's wages would be required to buy this small amount of grain while the wealthy would be untouched by the peculiar "famine"

F. The Fourth Seal (Revelation 6:7-8)

1. the fourth creature shows John a pale horse ridden by Death and Hades, who had power to kill a fourth of the Earth with sword, hunger, death and beasts

2. this horse is not white-victorious-but pale, sickly and gruesome—almost green

a. death mows down life and Hades accepts the remains until the time of final judgment

b. death is accomplished by this fourth horseman through carnal warfare, the famines that always result from such times, the pestilence of disease and infection and wild beasts

3. thus concludes the first four, similar seals

a. first, proclamation of the gospel

b. second, persecution of the saints in Roman empire

c. third, religious discrimination against them by pagan majority

d. fourth, woe on mankind that invariably also affects the saints

G. The Fifth Seal (Revelation 6:9-11)

1. when the fifth seal is opened, heartbreak takes on a human face

a. the first four seals showed the effects of the gospel and its persecution, but this seal shows the people who lived and died those signs

b. they were under the altar, symbolizing their willing self-sacrifice for the cause and they cried out for divine vengeance against the persecutors

c. theirs is not a lust for personal, self-serving vengeance, but a desire to see the majesty of God conquer the brutality of wicked men

2. the souls of the martyrs are conscious after death and able to communicate with God

a. they are given white robes of glory, victory and cleansing and instructed to wait and rest a while longer

b. sadly, their number would continue to grow throughout the reign of Domitian and even somewhat beyond, but only a little while longer, not thousands of years

H. The Sixth Seal (Revelation 6:12-17)

1. most commentators attach this seal to the final judgment, but our context has not led us beyond the wickedness of Rome and the troubling of first century saints

2. these images are recycled from the Old Testament, when they clearly did not mean the final judgment and only a dramatic shift in context could make them mean anything more today

3. John sees first an earthquake, the rocking of earthly powers like Caesar

a. then he sees the sun blackened and the moon turned red, images used by Isaiah (see 50:3) and

Joel (see 2:31) to describe temporal judgments on Babylon and ancient Jerusalem

- b. Jesus used similar images to predict descriptively the Roman sacking of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. in Matthew 24)
- c. the stars fall from the sky to symbolize the fall of rulers and leaders, as Isaiah had used the image to predict the fall of the king of Babylon (see Isaiah 14:1-14)
- d. the sky was rolled up as a scroll as Isaiah had also described in predicting judgment upon nations of his world and time (see Isaiah 34:1-4)
- e. mountains and islands, symbols of strength and endurance, were also taken away, as they were symbolically in Ezekiel 26:15-18)
- f. we even find men in the book of Hosea so troubled by temporal judgment that they pray for the mountains to fall on them (see 10:8) as we see here in the sixth seal
- g. even the obscure message of Nahum is repeated here (Nahum 1:1-6)
4. this is not the final judgment, but a temporal judgment committed against another wicked world power that set itself in God's way and begged for his wrath
 - a. just here, before the seventh seal can be loosed, an interlude occurs
 - b. chapter seven will show us the 144,000 and the great multitude before the last seal is opened

II. Some Applications

A. Context

1. Revelation has a context all its own and a context within the entire Bible
 - a. its own context narrows most of its predictions down to a short time after the first century saints began to call out from persecuted hearts for relief
 - b. its broader Bible context includes all the apocalyptic imagery of the Old Testament, which is recycled here as a way of showing the saints how God will ease their pain and take away another empire's power, as he did in Assyria, Babylon, Israel, Judah, Egypt and beyond
2. assigning these prophecies to the early centuries of the church and taking fraternal comfort from them will help us avoid the wild speculation and constant reinterpretation that occurs in Premillennialism

B. Persecution is A Given

1. all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution and the evil of the persecutors will only worsen as time goes on (Second Timothy 3:10-15)
2. we are tempted to compromise our faith, rephrase it in less offensive and effective terms and adapt it to the moral trends of the day, but all this is only an attempt to make friendships with the world and avoid paying the cost the souls under the altar paid
3. theirs is an honored place and we may never be put to such a test, but we will have no place even near them if we deny Christ just to save our jobs, our popularity or even our families (Matthew 10:32-39)

Conclusion

What will the seventh seal reveal and when will it finally be opened? We will return to Revelation 7 next week and see what is holding things up.

Revelation (14): The 144,000

(Revelation 7:1-17)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

John's emotional ride continues. He was alternately exasperated and elated as the presence of a mysterious scroll was noticed in chapter five and the worthy Christ was found to break its seals. Then the sixth chapter allowed the first six of those seals to be broken and they foretold the progress and persecution of the gospel in the first century, followed by God's interest in judging the troublers of spiritual Israel. The seventh seal was not yet broken, leaving everything up in the air as the chapter's curtain came down. The interlude continues in chapter seven as the order of the old Roman world prepares for disruption. Chapter seven holds back the events of this temporal judgment while the redeemed are sealed and protected.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The 144,000 (Revelation 7:1-8)

1. after the rush forward of the four horseman and then the cries of the souls under the altar and the symbolic earthquake and eclipse, the men of Earth had cried out, "For the great day of his wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (6:17)

2. but like the eye of a hurricane, the action suddenly abates and four angels are posted at the four corners of the Earth to hold back the winds that would continue the judgment

3. another angel ascends from the east bearing the seal of the living God

a. seals have an important place in both the history of God's dealings with man and the general history of nations

b. both Pharaoh and King Ahasuerus lent their signet rings to great Hebrew men and a seal issued by King Darius closed the den of lions in which God rescued Daniel

c. the apostles were sealed with an earnest of the Holy Spirit (see Second Corinthians 1:22) and Christians are likewise sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (see Ephesians 1:13)

4. this lone angel speaks to the other four and instructs them to hold back the winds until the servants of God in the path of destruction have been sealed

a. we have all seen pictures of great flooded areas along the Mississippi and occasionally, there will stand out one house that was providentially spared in the midst of overwhelming destruction

b. it almost seems as if that house was sealed somehow and specially protected, but here in Revelation 7, the symbolic sealing is genuinely divine and yet not a promise of physical protection, but divine acknowledgment and promise

c. Ezekiel had prophesied a similar marking in his day as destruction loomed in Jerusalem because of idolatry and the coming Babylonians (Ezekiel 9:1-11)

5. John is able to hear the number of souls sealed, not 139,998, but 144,000 exactly, an obviously symbolic number representing all the saved people on Earth at any given moment

a. the religious number 12 is simply squared and then multiplied by one thousand, indicating completeness, to arrive at this sum

b. an equal number is said to be sealed from each tribe of Israel and here that extinct fleshly nation is used to symbolize the spiritual one, the church of Christ (Romans 9:6-8, 2:25-29)

c. in Jesus, there is neither Jew nor Greek and so a segregation here would be unseemly (see Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:14-15)

6. with the 144,000, or the "church militant," now sealed, the vision can continue and the redeemed are recognized on Earth

B. The Great Multitude (Revelation 7:8-17)

1. while the 144,000 was in the path of God's fury upon their own persecutors, this great multitude is surrounding the throne of Jehovah

2. they represent the "church triumphant," having died in faith and been elevated to reward

a. unlike the former group, John does not hear any census taken of their number and simply describes them as innumerable; the few that will be saved is yet constituted by a great population of

worshippers

b. their white robes signify purity and their palm branches connect them with Christ's triumphal entry and "coronation parade" into Jerusalem just before his arrest and crucifixion; they lived with Christ and died with him as well

3. they are joined in shouts of praise by the angels, elders, and four creatures

4. one of the elders turns to John asks him to identify the great multitude and John wisely defers to the elder's knowledge

a. because the great tribulation that occasions the writing of this Revelation is the Roman persecution of the church under Nero, Domitian and other rulers, it follows that the multitude is composed specifically of the saints who survived that ordeal with their faith intact

b. they had not compromised their faith by worshiping Caesar and Jehovah and had not given into economic pressures or threats of arrest and execution

c. some had even gone to their deaths as martyrs for the cause

5. this state of glory is made to sound much like the last two chapters of Revelation and for good reason; these saints have passed from life into immortality and no painful thing can touch them now

a. God dwells among them and they live to worship

b. but will occur when the seventh seal is opened in the very next verse?

II. Some Applications

A. The Seal of God

1. later in this book, the beast will have his famous mark, but for now, it is more important that the saints on Earth receive theirs

2. the mark is symbolic, but vitally necessary to our place in God's sanctified throng (Second Timothy 2:19-21)

a. God knows those who are his because they wear his seal as the kind of people who do not luxuriate in iniquity, but who flee from it like the plague

b. the sealed are those who died with him in the burial of baptism (Romans 6:1-8)

c. the sealed are those who will endure (Philippians 2:12-13)

d. the sealed are those who remain faithful to death (Hebrews 10:35-39)

3. we are sealed with the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and whose presence becomes undeniable from the pattern of life we follow in him (Romans 8:1-11)

B. Israel

1. modern Premillennial thought holds that all Israel will be saved despite their continued rejection of Jesus Christ, because his second coming will convince them at last to accept him

2. yet the Bible says that the gospel message is the power of God unto salvation for the Jew first and also the Gentile (see Romans 1:16)

a. the recognition of separate races of Jew and Gentile was supposed to end with the gospel ministry, but some would keep it alive and actually excuse the continued rejection of our Lord (Ephesians 2:11-18)

b. when Paul says in Romans 11:26, "And so all Israel will be saved," he points not to a certainty of universal Jewish salvation, but a method for another remnant redemption from among that race, by means of the Deliverer whose message is in the world today

3. all Christians are Abraham's seed according to the promise and the church is now the household of God (see First Timothy 3:15)

a. and that places us in a position of responsibility and accountability; Amos declares for God, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2)

b. the redeemed of any race can be grafted out of God's vine because of sin and the lost can be grafted in because of faith

C. Reserving a White Robe

1. while it is unlikely that any of us would join that precise number of martyred souls, everyone of us who strives to live faithfully will suffer some persecution, some pressure to conform to the course of this world and only we who emerge from our own tribulation will be worthy to wear white as comforted worshippers in heaven

2. Joseph, the favored son wore a coat of many colors and the penitent prodigal son was given the

best robe by his merciful father

3. seeking God's favor in faith and pursuing repentance for every transgression will help ensure that our white robe is reserved (First John 3:1-3)

Conclusion

What will the seventh seal reveal? We shall see next time, but for now, rest assured that the church militant is sealed by God and the church triumphant is beyond harm. Make it your aim to be part of one and then the other, but never unsealed in the path of God's fury.

Revelation (15): The Seven Trumpets

(Revelation 8:1-9:21)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Some time ago, John had received a gift of hope regarding the persecution of Christians in first century Asia Minor. He had been transported in the Spirit to Heaven where a scroll appeared with the promise of answers. When Jesus began to open those seals systematically and sequentially, John saw a timeline of events that led from the seeds of gospel preaching to his present distress. As the Lord tarried at the seventh seal, however, an angel ordered the sealing of the faithful on Earth before its consequence was unleashed. They were the 144,000, a symbolic number representing all the faithful among the church militant in the path of whatever action God took upon evildoers. This sealing marked them as belonging to God, just as the lamb's blood had marked the Hebrews in Egypt that first passover night. A great multitude of the church triumphant in heaven responded with praise and surely John's mood was much improved. Now the time is ripe for the seventh seal to be opened and for the seven trumpets to begin to sound.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Seventh Seal Opened (Revelation 8:1-5)

1. by now, John has probably become accustomed to the blissful noise of heaven, a sound often interrupted on Earth by tears and cries of terror

2. John had listened to voices and thundering, to songs and shouts, but now as the seventh seal is opened, he is struck by silence, for about 30 minutes

a. the silence is the wait for the effects of that seal to be seen as the others were and the tension surely builds toward a climax

b. perhaps John was reminded of God's assurance to his troubled people in Habakkuk 2:20: "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

c. although 30 minutes is usually a short time, it is a long time to wait for something of such high anticipation

3. a united assembly of angels receives their trumpets as another of their kind approaches the altar with incense to add to the prayers of the saints

4. with assurance that man's prayers are reaching the only one who can answer them, the angel then casts a censer upon the earth which causes a great symbolic cacophony to resound again

a. prayer for vindication is thus answered with a shaking judgment meted out on the Roman empire

b. the prophets Isaiah and Joel used strikingly similar language to describe God's temporal judgments against Assyria long ago and so the figures are familiar to students of the Old Testament; the Roman world is shaking, though not necessarily literally

B. The First Four Trumpets (Revelation 8:6-13)

1. with the seven seals opened and completed, the unit of angels then prepared to blow their trumpets one by one; the first sounded his horn and a mixture of hail, fire and blood was thrown to the Earth, causing a third of the Earth and all the green grass to be incinerated

a. as with the seven seals, the trumpets begin with four related signs of natural disaster

b. hail and fire were tools of God's temporal judgment in the Old Testament and the introduction of blood simply reminds the reader that blood is required from the one who sheds innocent blood

c. the scorched Earth, likewise, is not literal, but a sign that those who live for the physical and abuse God's gifts will find their idol humbled

2. because of their perseverance and stature, mountains are used throughout scripture as symbolic of great powers and here the second trumpets slays one

a. it was said that prayer could move mountains and the petitions of the saints are described here as toppling the great power that afflicted them

b. Jeremiah had prophesied about the Babylonians: "'Behold, I am against you, O destroying

mountain, Who destroy the whole earth,' declares the Lord, 'And I will stretch out my hand against you, And roll you down from the crags And I will make you a burnt out mountain'" (51:25).

c. the bloodied sea and destruction of creatures and ships shows the economic effect on all of the world when such a power slips

3. the third trumpet sent a star falling from heaven which turned a third of the waters of the Earth to wormwood

a. Isaiah had predicted the fall of the king of Babylon with identical language (see Isaiah 14:12), blaming his pride and attempts at self-praise

b. this wormwood is a bitter wood, usually connected with the sin of idolatry in the Old Testament (see Deuteronomy 29:18) and the worship of the emperor in the first century was nothing short of idolatry

c. as when Israel worshiped the calf and Moses forced them to drink its powder mixed with water, so the world is poisoned when it succumbs to idols

4. the fourth trumpet smites a third of the sun, moon and stars

a. such partial eclipses are indicative of God's judgment, for he is darkening the very lights he created to rule the sky and illuminate his creation

b. Pharaoh's fall had been predicted in much the same terms by Ezekiel (see 32:7)

c. all these judgments by thirds are meant to warn mankind that it can and will get much worse if they do not heed the trumpets and return to God

d. the strong-winged, swift, scavenger eagle warns of what the last three trumpets will bring

C. The Fifth Trumpet (Revelation 9:1-12)

1. the signs and symbols continue to play out in front of John as an answer to the suffering of the saints of first century Asia Minor because of the excesses of the Roman Empire and her master, Domitian, who demanded to be revered as a deity

2. the fifth trumpet sounds and John sees a star that has fallen to Earth with the key to the abyss of smoke and fire

a. it is not that John sees Satan fall from heaven, but that he sees him having already fallen at some prior time

b. Jesus had seen the diminishing of his power and described it "as falling from heaven" and now the god of this world is seen darkening his realm with a veil of blindness and misunderstanding (Ephesians 2:1-2 and Second Corinthians 4:3-4)

c. this scene is not the creation of the devil, but an acknowledgment that he has been working in Earth for some time and now his effects are becoming harder to bear

3. locusts symbolically come out of the fire, for they have long been figures of divine judgment, especially through the prophet Joel (see 2:4, 1:6)

a. these were not ordinary locusts, but an insect with power like scorpions to sting and kill (see First Kings 12:11)

b. as awful as this sounds, it symbolizes something that disciples can tread under their feet, but which will poison the worldly (see Luke 10:19)

c. their symbolic nature is further proven by the ability of God to limit their diet to the carnal who had not been sealed by God and their bizarre equestrian appearance

d. the effect of these symbolic scorpions is to sting the carnal-minded with the misery of a life without God and the hopelessness of an eternity without him

4. they are led by Satan himself, or perhaps one of his ministers

a. Destruction is their leader's name here

b. perhaps this entire ordeal of the fifth trumpet can be summarized as the consequences of leading a life of spiritual neglect and moral decay, one that is directed, perhaps even subtly, by Satan

D. The Sixth Trumpet (Revelation 9:13-21)

1. the sounding of the sixth trumpet loosens the four angels who were bound at the Euphrates River to kill a third of mankind

2. an unimaginable army appears to do their bidding, numbering 200 million soldiers, whose formation would occupy a column one mile wide and 85 miles long (see Summers, 159)

a. obviously, it must be figurative because the largest army on Earth today only numbers about one million

b. their appearance symbolizes the wrath of judgment and their fire, smoke and brimstone are

even described as three fatal plagues out of their mouths, coupled with an aftermath of horror left in their wake

3. yet the other two-thirds of mankind that survived was not moved by the sign of this plague any more than Pharaoh was completely moved in the presence of Moses and his plagues

a. the warnings intended by these signs had not impressed carnal men and they had not repented of their idolatry, murder, sorcery, immorality and theft

b. this sixth trumpet has shown that God uses war and army after army to suit his purposes and punish or cleanse his world

c. in John's day, only the Parthian army bothered Rome much, but God has used the armies of Assyria, Babylon, Egypt and Israel to carry out his will and such are the fulfillment of the symbols here

II. Some Applications

A. Prayer

1. all that we see here is the answer to prayer and reason to trust in God and rest our hope securely upon him

2. prayer should be regular and unlimited by place or law (Philippians 4:4-7)

3. prayer should not be eliminated because of guilt, but should be seen as the salve for the wounds of shame (Luke 18:9-17)

4. prayer should be persistent (Luke 18:1-8)

5. prayer should be fervent (James 5:16-18)

B. Symbolic Language

1. the book of Revelation could be read as if everything in it were completely literal, but that would strip away its meaning and make it a work of fiction, if we understand it to apply primarily to the audience that first received it in beleaguered first century Asia Minor

2. passages that seem obviously symbolic probably are, and those which contain words such as "like" and "as" are plainly figurative

3. we all use symbolic language in our speech and we should let God as well, especially when he is telegraphing his method by recycling so many images from Old Testament temporal judgments on men and nations

Conclusion

Yet again, we are interrupted before the seventh item can be seen. What will the seventh trumpet reveal when it is sounded?

Revelation (16): The Little Scroll

(Revelation 10:1-11)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The presence of interludes like the one here in chapter 10 make the Revelation all the more full of tension and anticipation. One can only imagine the emotions of the apostle John and his first readers among the persecuted churches of Asia Minor at the end of the first century. They were the ones who yearned ardently for relief and in this book, God's providential care is promised and the fate of the faithful is spelled out. Six of seven trumpets have sounded and now an interlude intervenes as John discovers a little scroll in the hand of an angel.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Interruption (Revelation 10:1-7)

1. three woes had been promised in chapter nine, as the effect of the sounding of the last three trumpets

a. the first woe had brought torment from a figurative army of locusts who hurt men for five months

b. the second woe had delivered an equally figurative army of 200 million horseman who killed a third of mankind through warfare

c. the seventh trumpet and third woe will not be revealed until chapter 11 and so John and his readers are compelled to wait a while; only John does not do so passively, but is invited again to participate in what he has mainly observed until now

2. these verses are intended, like the interlude earlier between the sixth and seventh seals, to reassure the saints that the gospel is not destroyed by the revelation of these things

3. John sees another mighty angel descending from heaven in a cloud with a little book in his hand
a. he is not Jesus, but of the order of strong angels introduced in Revelation 5:2 (see 18:21); his appearance in a cloud carries the significance of a judgment

b. his rainbow halo and sunny visage show him as a minister of Christ and his covenant

c. this second book used in the Revelation is smaller than the one which was sealed seven times; its contents are clearly different as this chapter reveals

d. the angel shows how this message spans the globe by standing both on land and sea

4. the amazing noisiness of Revelation returns as the angel shouts with a sound like a lion's roar, full of power and unmistakable; it is a noise such as God used to announce judgment to the wicked through Jeremiah (see 25:30) and Amos (see 3:8) and is answered by the figurative voices of seven thunders

a. Job asked, "But the thunder of his power, who can understand?" (26:14) and David heard the glory of God thundering (see Psalm 29:3-4)

b. a clap of thunder is enough to frighten a little child and although parents try to mollify them with stories of clouds bumping together, in reality, something marvelous, electric and powerful is occurring and children are right not to ignore it

c. the thunder here is meant to attract attention and signify justice

5. John is about to write what the seven thunders stated, but he is stopped by a voice beyond the angel in heaven

a. we will never know what John heard as we will never know all that God has prepared to protect his children's spirits

b. there are still some secret things which belong only to God and these are among them

6. as a witness rises in the courtroom to take his oath of honesty, so this mighty angel prepares to swear by God's witness

a. he swears that the delay will surely end when the seventh trumpet sounds, the delay in "the fulfillment of the divine purpose regarding the fortunes of the church on Earth," but not the end of time and final judgment

b. it is the mystery of God which the prophets had predicted that is finished, not time itself, and the mystery of God is the scheme of salvation through the proclamation of the gospel to all nations

(Ephesians 1:9-11, 3:1-11)

c. the complete revelation of this formerly mysterious subject is about to be accomplished in spite of the persecution and because of the saints' perseverance (First Peter 1:10-12)

B. Eating The Little Book (Revelation 10:8-11)

1. John is then instructed to retrieve the opened little book from the strong angel, but when he asks for it, the angel tells him to eat the book, as Ezekiel had been told to do himself (Ezekiel 2:8-3:3, 14)

a. this is more recycled imagery, meant to communicate certain information to the saints without detection by opponents among Caesar's forces

b. John was to fill himself with the book, a figure for mastering the contents of the little book intellectually and spiritually

c. the message was sweet like honey in his mouth, for he was a servant of God and its principles appealed to him spiritually and supported his hopes religiously

d. the same message, however, proved to make his stomach bitter because determined infidels would make its proclamation unpleasant and besides, the consequences of not knowing God and not obeying the gospel is heart-rending, even if it is just

2. some who realize the costs and sacrifices involved with submitting to God's will turn their backs on teaching it, or teaching the difficult parts of it

a. John is reminded that he will have to endure that bitter sensation and preach the message to a lost and dying world anyway

b. the little book most likely contains the words that begin in chapter 11 and continue to the end of the book; those words are full of sweetness to the suffering Christian, but bitterness from infidels

II. Some Applications

A. Assimilating God's Word

1. as John and Ezekiel and Jeremiah were made to ingest God's word, so we are to feed upon the milk and meat of his scripture, that we might assimilate his will into our spirits to sanctify them

2. Joshua told his followers: "This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (1:8).

a. we have our New Testaments which provide a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, but only if we employ them as open books like the one John ate

b. the devil is not afraid of a dusty Bible (Second Timothy 2:15 and First Timothy 4:13-15)

3. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

B. God's Promises Are Sweet As Honey

1. every word is as sweet in honey if you are spiritually disposed to regarding them as light and life (Psalm 19:7-11)

2. they are sweet words of guidance, promise, even rebuke to the disciple (Second Peter 1:2-4)

C. Persecution is Inevitable

1. John's message to his first century audience was that the pain and persecution they were experiencing were necessary parts of their service to God

a. it would not cease immediately, but it would eventually end (First Thessalonians 3:1-4)

b. it is only by enduring all that you will find a home in heaven, for "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (Second Timothy 3:12).

c. John repeated words of Jesus ("Do not marvel, my brethren, if the world hates you" (First John 3:13).

2. perseverance is the key, for "he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (Mark 13:13) and "if we suffer, we shall also reign with him" (Second Timothy 2:12).

Conclusion

A Christian must understand that there will be both pleasant and unpleasant times in his life on earth in service to God, but he must also keep in mind that only joy awaits him on the other side of life.

Revelation (17): The Two Witnesses

(Revelation 11:1-19)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

When last we heard from the apostle John, he had been instructed to ingest a little scroll, which proved to be sweet in his mouth, but bitter in his stomach. Like Ezekiel before him, John's experience proved how ultimately sweet the word of God is, but how bitter its proclamation can be made by its reception among sinful men. John was prophesying more than 1900 years ago about events which were then about to occur and as we read his words today, they remind us of God's providential care for his servants in the most unkind environment. As we progress into the eleventh chapter of Revelation, we find John engaged in a curious exercise and introduced to two faithful witnesses. What did all this mean for that first audience of early Christians reading in persecuted Asia Minor? What lessons can we glean from the fulfillment of these predictions so long ago?

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Two Witnesses (Revelation 11:1-6)

1. the word "then" commences chapter 11 and reminds us that the chapter breaks and even the series breaks in our yearlong examination of the book are of human origin; chapter 11 simply continues the vision of chapter 10 that we could not study all at once last time

2. John's experience as mere observer fades more distantly into memory as his active participation builds after ingesting the little scroll and now he is told to measure the temple

a. he is given a reed like a measuring rod to measure the sanctuary, the altar and the worshipers

b. the word translated "temple" is actually sanctuary and may have reference to the tabernacle of the early Old Testament instead of one of the temples in Jerusalem

c. with the last temple destroyed 26 years earlier, the symbolism here is made plain—the sanctuary of God in this age is the church of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:19-22)

1. Christians comprise a holy priesthood of believers who offer up their personal sacrifices and worship to God through Christ their high priest

2. the altar is where the prayers of the saints are offered to God (see 8:3)

3. the significance of this measuring is to communicate the fact that God recognizes these people, can count the very hairs upon their troubled heads and is able to comfort them

a. Ezekiel, likewise, was told to watch an angel measure the temple, its court and walls, and his vision emphasized the issue of sanctification among God's people

b. Zechariah also saw a measured Jerusalem, but without walls, indicating the superiority of divine protection

4. measuring up with God then is about living by faith in sanctification from the world and trust in his word and will

a. the tabernacle before the temple of Solomon had only one court (see Exodus 27:9) and perhaps that forms the vision that John sees here

b. or it could be the temple of Herod which had a court of the Gentiles which was open to everyone

c. John saw only one court, one outside realm, and it was not measured but was left to the unredeemed and those outside the kingdom of Christ

d. the outsiders will persecute the saints for 42 months, or three and one half years, an apocalyptic number that is half of the perfect seven and therefore indicative of an indefinite, broken period of time

5. for this same duration, the two witnesses will prophesy in sackcloth

a. simply put, the persecution will not stop or outlast the proclamation of the gospel

b. the two witnesses form a symbolic pairing, not a literal prophesy of two actual, distinct individuals; they anonymously symbolize all who carry the gospel forward

1. they are compared to two olive trees and two lamp stands, that is, the source of illumination's fuel and that which supports its standing

2. as two witnesses were required to establish a matter and the disciples were sent out

preaching in pairs, so these witnesses symbolize their work

c. they should not cower from their appointed mission, for like Elijah who could call down fire or stop the rain from falling, God will maintain them as they preach the word

B. The Beast Ascends (Revelation 11:7-10)

1. the beast is introduced here, but will not assume a leading role in the Revelation narrative until chapter 13

2. once the witnesses have completed the delivery of their message, the beast rises from the bottomless pit to kill them

a. we are reminded of Paul who took the gospel into all the world in spite of great opposition, but was finally killed at about the same time as Peter who preached mainly to Jews

b. the force that killed them and many like them is the beast, the long arm of the Roman empire

3. their death will be a cause for rejoicing among people who tired of hearing the witnesses' messages which condemned their acts of worldliness

a. their bodies will be mocked and all the heathen will prove the justice in leaving them outside the measured temple

b. as Jesus was actually crucified outside of the city of Jerusalem, so we have these undredeemed people forming a city of the world outside the holy camp of the church

C. Resurrection (Revelation 11:11-13)

1. their merriment proved short-lived, however, for in fine apocalyptic fashion, the faithful two are resurrected from the dead like the man whom Elijah restored to life (see Second Kings 13:21) and the dry bones of the house of Israel (see Ezekiel 37:10)

2. the Master who had commissioned them to proclaim this gospel, even to the point of martyrdom, fulfills his promise and raises them out of the Earth to a place of reward

3. with righteous indignation, God couples this ascension with an earthquake that renders a partial judgment upon the fleshly world, causing the survivors to reconsider their wickedness, if only insincerely and temporarily

4. the perseverance of the witnesses while they preached, the reaction of the wicked, the witness's eventual demise and eternal reward well illustrate to the first century Christians and us the wisdom in holding fast to God's word in season and out

5. no particular historical event is being considered in these symbols, but rather, the truth of the matter whenever truth is preached and righteous men are troubled

D. The Seventh Trumpet (Revelation 11:14-19)

1. the first two woes were revealed in the fifth and sixth trumpets and now the time is approaching for the seventh trumpet to announce the third woe

2. despite the persecution of worldly men, the gospel has reached the entire world and the kingdom of Christ is fully established with Jesus upon the throne of David

3. Satan's attempts to kill the Messiah and persecute his church to death in the first century have failed and the gospel has taken hold

4. the center of worship in heaven is then revealed to John, who sees the ark of the covenant and natural symbols of power and justice and glory

a. the death of Christ had rent the veil of the temple on Earth in two and his resurrection had given man access to the holy of holies (Hebrews 10:19-23)

b. the power of God is thundering in the heavens even as John prepares to fulfill the mandate of the little scroll in preaching about many peoples, nations, tongues and kings

II. Some Applications

A. In God's Temple

1. the allure of this world is strong, through the appeal of fleshly indulgence to the power of popularity to the weakness of laziness and moral indifference

2. we are admonished by the devil to go along with things because it is easier and less likely to create waves, but to follow our Master, we have to set sail against the course of this world (Hebrews 13:10-14)

3. we are identified and measured while we dwell in the sanctuary of our Lord, the church of the Firstborn son, but when are either content to dwell outside or venture back there to play with the lion, we

are vulnerable to attack and decimation

B. Preach The Word?

1. early Christians worried about losing their lives for preaching the gospel, but we mainly worry that people might frown at us
2. we must preach the word like the two witnesses did, without fear or failure (Second Timothy 4:1-5)
3. "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

C. Victory

1. on the day Jesus was crucified, the devil was allowed to taste what he thought was victory and when he martyred Paul and Peter and all those early Christians, he was allowed the thought that he was methodically killing the hope of mankind in redemption
2. so long as that hope continues to beat in the heart of God's people, victory remains as genuine in prospect as it was in reality for all those who died as faithful witnesses so long ago (First John 5:1-5)

Conclusion

The eleventh chapter of Revelation is a wonderful promise to the persecuted brethren of the first century that their faithfulness would not be taken for granted by God. They kept the faith and it spread throughout the world and remains a lesson for us today.

Revelation (18): The Struggle

(Revelation 12:1-17)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The little scroll that John received from an angel and then ate back in chapter ten is now recalled and its contents are described here in Revelation chapter 12. The work of Satan, especially as it is accomplished by his ungodly cohort among men, is exposed and predicted for failure. The allies of God, the Lamb and his faithful saints, struggle through persecution to victory by being faithful even unto death. More characters are introduced into the plot here in chapter 12, including a dragon, a woman and a child. As the first century church was begging for answers about their persecuted condition, the message of this book must give them hope and comfort.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Woman (Revelation 12:1-6)

1. a great sign is seen from heaven's perspective—a woman arrayed with the illumination of God's three dispensations: the starlit age of the hopeful patriarchs, the moonlit age of Moses and the tutorial Law and the sunlit era of Christ and the New Testament of grace

a. she is not the Jewish nation who rejected Christ, or the church who is the product of the word or Mary who is not sufficiently mighty, but all of those who formed the remnant people of God upon a polluted earth and who keep his covenant

b. Micah 4:10 predicted: "Writhe and labor to give birth, Daughter of Zion, Like a woman in childbirth, For now you will go out of the city, Dwell in the field, And go to Babylon. There you will be rescued; There the Lord will redeem you From the hand of your enemies."

c. it was from this remnant of the Babylonian invasion that the Christ was to come some hundreds of years later in a manger in Bethlehem

2. this great sign includes the pregnancy of this woman

a. like Israel crying out in Egyptian captivity for physical redemption, the true sons of Abraham had hoped for spiritual redemption and her deliverer was delivered suddenly and miraculously to Mary

b. Christ, physically, is the product of Israel's faithful remnant after 586 B.C.

3. hope is assaulted, however, by the appearance of another sign in heaven—a great, fiery red dragon with seven crowned heads and ten horns

a. the dragon, itself, is not in heaven, but the sign is—an important distinction

b. he is identified for us as Satan, troubler of man since the Garden of Eden

c. with a figurative dragon's tail, his power is exemplified in sweeping away a third of the stars in the sky (see Daniel 8:10)

d. but that display was just a warmup for his effort here to devour the woman's child upon her knee

1. the scene does not so much depict the actual night in which Jesus was born, but the entire period from his birth to his ascension back into heaven to sit beside his Father

2. more than man ever knew, this was an era fraught with danger and demonic assault upon the redemptive work of God; although Jesus made it look simple, it was filled with pain and hardship and the uncertainty of man's ability to receive truth made it harder

4. the Devil, of course, failed, despite an apparent victory at the cross, for the empty tomb defeated his greatest ally, which is death

a. the Child took hold of his scepter to rule in his spiritual kingdom, the church, from the throne of David in heaven (see Hebrews 1:8)

b. he was caught up into heaven, not for his protection, but his coronation (see Acts 2:29-33) and the Woman, representing God's faithful remnant now fully in the church also flees into the wilderness where she was promised protection like Moses, Elijah, Mary and Joseph and the apostle Paul

c. there she is nourished for a period identical in duration to the assault on the city and the witness's prophesying

d. as Israel was nourished in the wilderness with God's physical manna, so now spiritual Israel will feed upon the true bread that comes down from heaven, Christ and every word that proceeds from the

mouth of God

B. War (Revelation 12:7-12)

1. the war that breaks out in heaven between Michael and the Devil and their servants is not to be considered literally any more than the picture of the Devil as a Dragon
 - a. it is a spiritual battle teaching some great moral truth and its conclusion is the defeat of the devil and his loss of control over men
 - b. it is not looking back to the creation of Satan, nor to whatever events caused him to choose evil and become God's enemy, but to a period just after the ascension of Christ in which he suffered a great defeat (John 12:27-33)
 - c. the war in heaven symbolizes Satan's defeat by the resurrection and ascension of Christ into heaven and the exposure of his methods in deceiving mankind into choosing sin and death over righteousness and life
 - d. the dragon's tail has been trimmed and hope in man is renewed by the victory of Christ over him and over the tomb (Hebrews 2:14-18)
2. with this series of events concluded, God's scheme of redemption is now fully come; Satan, the adversary, is exposed and weakened and grace reigns supreme and supremely attainable
3. victory comes to the seer's brethren by the blood of the Lamb, the word of their testimony and their willingness to die rather than recant their convictions
 - a. these are they who were persecuted in the early days of the church and whose deaths haunted the living with fears of a similar fate (First Peter 1:3-7)
 - b. this hope makes the next truth somewhat more bearable (Satan's failure to prevent the coronation of Christ and creation of his grace kingdom leaves him no alternative, but to fight against its expansion and against its citizens)

C. Persecution (Revelation 12:13-17)

1. with her child gone, the woman is left to suffer the persecution of Satan—the remnant people of the early church of Christ were afflicted with terrible persecution by the devil through the hands of the ruling Roman caesars (see John 15:20)
 - a. her flight to the wilderness in verse 6 is simply developed more fully in this passage, as she suffers through an indefinite period of distress indicated by the symbolic numbers (see time, times and half a time equal three-and-one-half years or 1260 days)
 - b. her wilderness of safety is prayer and meditation and a life hid with Christ in God (see Colossians 3:3)
2. the devil, acting through a willing accomplice in Rome, would attempt to drown the infant church in a flood of lies, idolatry, seductions and fears, for he is the father of lies
 - a. knowing this, the early church resisted him and survived
 - b. but the earth, symbolizing the worldly and unregenerate, unwittingly and providentially helped the church woman by swallowing up the lies and appeasing Caesar with near complete influence over his subjects
3. the dragon was not content to hold sway over the worldly; he still wanted to destroy the kingdom of grace and wipe it off the face of the earth, but now he begins to attempt it on an individual basis, trying saved souls personally to win them back

II. Some Applications

A. Being Part of A Remnant Nation

1. man expects mainly to see great things result from large and powerful efforts, but the God who speaks in a still, small voice, usually chose the less noble and mighty to accomplish his objectives
 - a. what the mighty nation of Israel could not do—bring forth the Messiah—the tiny remnant of a demoralized and deflowered nation did
 - b. the Messiah's kingdom now bears not the proud signs of earthly empires like Great Britain of old and America today, nor even the hierarchy of Catholicism or the big programs of Calvinism
 - c. she is humble and invisible, except in the efforts of her individual components, grateful to be part of something glorious, if not something ostentatious (First Corinthians 1:18-31)
2. why should anyone be surprised that God's people are but a remnant, when he has predicted that only the few will be saved?
3. moreover, why can we not be content with remnant status instead of falling prey to peer pressure

and ecumenism in religion?

4. the kingdom grows not by broadening its standards, but its proclamation

B. Overcoming

1. that loud voice told John that the martyrs overcame the devil by Christ's blood, the word and their willingness to die for both rather than live by Caesar's mercy

2. we will likewise be born again by Christ's blood and sustained in faith by our willingness to sacrifice anything and refuse everything that threatens that redemptive relationship (Hebrews 12:1-4)

C. Keeping The Commandments

1. lastly, John warns us that those who are striving to keep God's commandments will suffer the slings and arrows of a defeated, but not yet powerless tempter

2. the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking saints to devour through his deceptions and enticements

3. he is at his most deceptive when using false religion (Second Corinthians 11:12-15)

Conclusion

This great war is not the great war that Premillennialists predict, but an awesome challenge inflicted upon the saints every day by the devil, who motivates wicked men and false teachers to deceive people into sin or a false sense of security. Be on guard and deflect his lies with the shield of faith.

Revelation (19): 666

(Revelation 13:1-18)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The persecution of the early churches has been reported symbolically in this Revelation with images of awful beasts tormenting innocent witnesses and a pure lady and her child. Although the power of the tempter has been curtailed by the ascendancy of Jesus Christ to the throne of David, he continues to entice Christians into sin and apostasy. In spite of this all-out war on the saints, God protects them and enables the truly faithful to persevere. As chapter 12 becomes chapter 13, a new beast appears from the sea to trouble the church. The relentlessness of the Roman persecution is formidable and discouraging, but the church will prevail.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Sea Beast Appears (Revelation 13:1-4)

1. unlike many of their neighbors, the ancient Hebrews were not a seafaring people; this is reflected in that the parables of Christ focus less upon voyages and storms and more upon farming and husbandry

2. that this beast arises from the sea adds to his mystique and horror and the clear recycling of symbols from the book of Daniel clarifies his purpose and power (Daniel 7:1-14)

a. this sea beast in Revelation bears a resemblance to Daniel's fourth beast, which equated to the fourth world power to come after Nebuchadnezzar, the Roman empire when considered chronologically (Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, Roman; see Daniel 2:31-45)

b. this fourth beast is an amalgam of the first three for it held sway over the combined land mass of them

c. if Rome is undeniably the fourth beast in Daniel, the similarities make it certain that Rome is the sea beast in Revelation, empowered by the devil's will and cruelty

3. the empire is mortally wounded and then shockingly healed, perhaps as a reference to the death of the persecutor of Peter and Paul, Nero, 30 years before

a. the death of great rulers sometimes throws the nation into chaos, but Rome survived Nero's suicide and even greatly revived its persecution of the church under Domitian

b. the saying, "you can't fight city hall," might have originated here, for the people of the world felt powerless to resist Rome and simply hopped on the bandwagon of her success

B. The Sea Beast Blasphemes (Revelation 13:5-10)

1. four things are given to the beast, the empire and its sovereign Caesar

a. a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies (the Caesars demanded to be called God themselves and tormented any who tried to hold true to Jehovah)

b. authority to continue 42 months (a symbolically indefinite period of persecution)

c. authority to make war with the saints and to overcome them (the persecution)

d. authority over every tribe, people, tongue and nation (worldwide political dominance)

2. like the crucifixion of Christ, overcoming the saints is only a temporary victory, for resurrection turns death into life (Daniel 7:21-27)

a. resurrection is the hope of those whose names are written in the Book of Life, the record of God of all his faithful children

b. from the very foundation of the world, the gospel mission of Jesus Christ was foreordained and this Rome cannot undo

c. divine vengeance would have its day upon the captors of God's people

C. The Land Beast Appears (Revelation 13:11-18)

1. like a poodle with the bark of a bulldog, this land beast has the docile and harmless appearance of a lamb, but the growl of a terrible dragon, the voice of wickedness

a. coming up out of the Earth, he has fully imbibed the lies and deceptions that the land swallowed up to protect the church in chapter 12

b. later the land beast will be called the false prophet (see 16:13) and all this combines to make clear that it has some connection to false religion, the devil's most subtly deceptive way to seduce people (see Matthew 7:15, First Corinthians 11:15)

2. the land beast acts under the authority of the sea beast; it is the enforcer of emperor worship in Asia Minor

a. to prop up the emperor's claims to divinity, this enforcement crew would travel through Asia Minor perpetrating false miracles and illusions upon the superstitious people (Matthew 24:24 and Second Thessalonians 2:9-10)

b. this is idolatry then, in making images of the emperor Domitian who claimed to be God and used servants to create illusions of supernatural ability

c. the brethren in Asia Minor already knew that to refuse to worship the emperor would mean execution

3. as God sealed his people with his name upon their foreheads, so now the land beast demands visible signs of allegiance to the sea beast, the empire

a. this is probably not so much literal as figurative of the ostracism that Christians faced in the marketplace and community from being known as a minority that resisted Caesar-worship

b. the sea beast is identified by the number "666," most likely not denoting any particular individual, but symbolically the idea of utter imperfection and inevitable doom in Oriental numerology

4. as time and chapter designation interrupt this stirring and frightening scene, we find the authority of the sea beast, the empire, being executed by the land beast, his priests and enforcers as the idolatry of a deified Caesar marches forward among the churches

II. Some Applications

A. Kingdom Come

1. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the kingdom to come and their prayers were answered

a. Jesus promised the kingdom would appear in short order (Mark 9:1)

b. unless he lied or was mistaken, it did and clearly scripture supports the truth that the church is his kingdom, a kingdom not after the kind this world usually recognizes, but is superior (Acts 2:29-33)

2. John's references to the prophecy of Daniel in this chapter only serve to remind us that Daniel predicted the establishment of God's unbreakable kingdom 500 years before in both Daniel 2 and 7 and those prophecies centered on an establishment during the days of the Roman empire (Daniel 2:31-45)

a. we need no longer pray for the kingdom to come, for it has, but we must pray for the king to return in the clouds to commence eternity

b. our Lord is indeed King Most High (see First Timothy 6:15)

B. Sin Is Deceptive

1. the power of the devil is found in his nature, for he is the father of lies and delights in fooling Christians into justifying their sin on some weak basis

2. the two most deceptive creatures in his army are false religion and self

a. false religions bears so many true marks and yet errs in organization or mission or creed

b. self is not expected to lie, but does and rationalizes away the pangs of conscience

3. moreover that deception hardens the heart the longer it is tolerated (Hebrews 3:12-15)

C. Idolatry

1. Rome was busy reviving the kind of idolatry God's people had cast off after the Babylonian invasion 600 years before

2. idolatry is the adoration of anything to the point of rivalry with the Almighty and invites a severance of fellowship from him (First Corinthians 10:14-22)

a. whether we idolize the opinions of great men or kneel before the almighty dollar, idolatry asks God to share the throne of hearts and he will leave them first

b. if you find yourself dismissing spiritual obligations and opportunities in favor of carnal choices, you might be in as much danger as those people building statues of Domitian

Conclusion

The appearance of these beasts in chapter 13 had heightened the tension in Asia Minor. The emperor is not only ruling powerfully far away, but has deputized a cadre of unholy priests to enforce his adoration. Will the saints be able to persevere?

Revelation (20): Babylon is Fallen

(Revelation 14:1-20)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Our last visit to the Revelation of Jesus Christ permitted us to eavesdrop upon the readers in the first century churches of Asia Minor, who were giving warning to their contemporaries of the evil done by the Roman Empire. The mark of the beast, 666, was identified to give a figurative representation of his utter imperfection and excessive nature in falling well short of God's ideal for him. Although many try to make the number 666 fit upon men and things today, that prophecy was given and applied 1900 years ago. While chapter 13 is filled with anguish and fear, the fourteenth chapter opens immediately with hope and the promise of ultimate victory. The intense persecution emanating from Caesar must not deter their walk by faith.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. On Mount Zion (Revelation 14:1-5)

1. verse one drives away the despair of the thirteenth chapter with a new vision of the worthy Lamb and his 144,000 sealed believers standing on Mount Zion

2. Mount Zion was initially the stronghold of David in the Old Testament (see Second Samuel 5:7), but came to represent God's presence and protective relationship with his nation

a. from Mount Zion, it was believed, refuge and blessing would flow and be found; Mount Zion was like an island of peace in the midst of an unruly and oppressive world

b. more than that, though, Mount Zion came to represent the origin of the Messiah (see Psalm 2:6, 110:2-6)

c. when we reach the New Testament, Mount Zion is a purely figurative description of the realm of the glorified Messiah (Hebrews 12:22-24)

3. the Mount Zion, then, upon which the Lamb and his 144,000 stand is not heaven itself or a literal mountain in Israel, but security of the church militant upon Earth

a. the 144,000 were first introduced back in chapter seven; they were and are a representation of all the faithful on Earth at any given time, who are sealed by God with the Holy Spirit so that they can endure persecution (Second Timothy 2:19)

b. they are not a group of special saints or a subset of the church, but a figurative number in which all the redeemed willing to die rather than recant their confession are found

4. upon seeing the 144,001, John hears a voice from heaven with the qualities of majesty, volume and melody; he compares the voice to the sound made by rushing waters, thunder and harps, but the voice is not literally any of these

a. most likely, the great multitude of the second half of chapter seven forms this chorus singing the new song in heaven, for everyone else is accounted for in the audience

b. the 144,000 are learning the new song and are identified by five characteristics

1. they are the redeemed from the Earth, purchased with Christ's shed blood (3)

2. they are spiritually pure, having refused to fornicate with false gods and idols (4)

3. they have taken up their crosses and continue to follow Jesus wherever faith takes them

(4)

4. they are the first fruits of the gospel, spiritual Israel (4; see also James 1:8)

5. they were free from religious error, having neither taught nor believed the compromises of pagan worship (5)

B. Voices (Revelation 14:6-13)

1. the first angel flies in the midst of heaven with the everlasting gospel to preach to every soul on Earth

a. he admonishes men to fear God and glorify him for the hour of judgment had come

b. this angel's voice represents the proclamation of the original gospel message by faithful Christians and the judgment that was facing that original audience was one upon Rome; it is the moment of truth in Asia Minor

2. the first angel made preparation for dealing with this judgment on a city compared to Babylon of old; the second angel announces its arrival
 - a. the angel talks as if Babylon had already fallen, for when God plans to do something, it is as good as done
 - b. 50 years before the Babylon of old was destroyed, God told Jeremiah, "Babylon is suddenly fallen and destroyed: wail for her" (51:8)
 - c. this Babylon of the first century is much like the Babylon of old that God punished for her iniquity
 - d. Rome is to be punished because she had become a forceful influence for wickedness on Earth, compelling otherwise harmless and even faithful people to commit acts of immorality and blasphemy to puff up the throne of the empire
3. the third angel adds warning to all those who refused the gospel of the first angel and thought they might avoid the punishment of the second because they were not active parts of the empire
 - a. all those who compromised and worshiped Caesar despite knowing better will suffer the same bitter recompense
 - b. this description matches the teaching of Christ on hell and it is there that all those who reject the gospel or mingle it with idolatry will suffer eternal punishment
4. with the voice from heaven, the patience of the saints is their steady perseverance and determination to do the right thing without faltering in the face of persecution; they are rewarded with rest from their labors and reward for their good works (First Corinthians 15:58)

C. Harvest and Vintage (Revelation 14:14-20)

1. the white cloud is at once a symbol of purity and judgment and the one riding upon it must be Christ, the son of Man, crowned by glory and prepared to harvest
2. the conditions on Earth signified that it was time to put in the sickle and reap; the persecution by Rome had reached a crescendo at which it was time for God to act as he had so long ago when Egypt had enslaved his people
3. after Christ thrusts in his sickle, another angel follows suit and then still another comes out from the altar with the power of fire, calling for a gathering of ripe grapes
 - a. this altar and fire identify him with the burnt incense of the saints' prayers for vindication upon the persecutors
 - b. the world of John's day was fully ripe for this temporal judgment upon yet another nation in a long line of troublers
4. this harvest of the Earth indicates the removal of the wicked who had participated in Caesar worship
 - a. Joel used similar language in prophesying of the affairs of state in his time (see 3:13)
 - b. the resultant sea of blood symbolizes the completeness of God's judgment upon this wicked regime and its adherents
 - c. this is not the final judgment, but another temporal judgment upon an earthly realm, described in highly symbolic terms, and fully applicable to the suffering saints of the first century

II. Some Applications

A. 144,000

1. the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society has snatched the 144,000 out of context to further their doctrine of two hopes for mankind
2. they reason that the 144,000 is a literal and finite number and only that group will reach heaven, while the lesser faithful will be consigned to a refurbished Earth after the final judgment
 - a. this, however, gives man two hopes for eternity, when the Holy Spirit says that we all share the same hope (see Ephesians 4:4)
 - b. that hope cannot be a refurbished Earth, for this planet is not to survive the final judgment (Second Peter 3:10-12)
 - c. furthermore, if the number is literal, then everything about it must be literal and that would mean that no woman could be part of the group, nor any married person

B. One Gospel

1. the first angel announces the gospel, but it cannot be any other gospel than what Christ delivered through his and his apostles' ministry (Galatians 1:6-9)

2. Mormons believe that the angel Moroni brought a new revelation to Joseph Smith, but the so-called gospel in the book of Mormon is quite different from the one found in the Bible and it should be rejected

3. Ephesians 4:5 adds that there is one faith and Mormonism cannot be it, by virtue of its contradiction of the word of God at every turn

C. Eternity of Hell

1. many today profess to be Christians but deny the faith when it comes to the subject of hell

2. they cannot believe that a loving God would allow anyone to be punished eternally, even if he says that he will (see Matthew 25:46)

3. such an attitude is pure self-delusion and supposes that God will be unjust and unfaithful in the day of judgment by canceling everything he has ever said about heaven and hell

4. the punishment is eternal and the way to avoid it is not by pretending it can't happen, but by planning to end up elsewhere, in heaven (Matthew 13:40-50)

5. participation in evil by persecution or by indifference will be punished (Second Thessalonians 1:6-10)

Conclusion

The message to our first century brethren was that their troublers would be punished and their brethren's deaths would be avenged by God. They should remain faithful despite the persecution and wait with the patience of the saints for their hope to be fulfilled.

Revelation (21): The Seven Bowls of Armageddon

(Revelation 15:1-16:21)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

In chapters eight and nine, seven trumpets sounded to signify a judgment upon a third of the earth. Now in chapters 15-16, seven bowls are poured out to symbolize judgment again, but on all of society. Before the bowls of wrath are emptied, however, a scene of rejoicing is reported for this judgment is beneficial to God's children.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Seven Angels Are Introduced (Revelation 15:1-8)

1. this is the third great sign in heaven that John has witnessed and each had preceded a special revelation from God

2. the sign is of seven angels with seven plagues that will fulfill completely the wrath of God in this local context

3. the crystal sea introduced back in chapter four is seen again, only now it has obtained a reddish tint because of the saints' fiery trials and God's retribution for them; before, it completely separated man and God, but now the martyrs are able to stand upon it in victory over the emperor's assault on their faith

a. harps are borrowed from the Old Testament to symbolize thankful praise, but the martyrs are heard simply to sing in worship like the New Testament church, whose only instrument was their hearts (see Ephesians 5:19)

b. their song is that of Moses and the Lamb

1. the original song of Moses praised God for leading Israel through the Red Sea out of Egyptian captivity (see Exodus 15)

2. now it is the worthy Lamb who has delivered God's children from the clutches of another bloodthirsty, idolatrous sovereign

3. the song is a combination of words from Psalms, Proverbs and the law, all of which joyously glorify God for his holiness and authority

4. for a second time in this Revelation, John sees the tabernacle open in heaven

a. now the seven angels appear from within, dressed in purity and rank

b. one of the four living creatures from before hands the seven golden bowls of wrath to the angels and the temple fills with smoke, as if the Lord were still leading Israel in a pillar of fire as before

B. Seven Bowls Are Outpoured (Revelation 16:1-21)

1. the first angel's bowl is poured out upon the earth and a foul and loathsome sore is produced upon all idolatrous men who bore the mark of the beast; as body sores indicate an accumulation of toxins and impurities, so this plague symbolizes a building up of iniquity from worshipping a false god

2. the second angel's bowl is poured out upon the sea and everything in it died; this plague symbolizes the putrid state of humanity in which immorality reigned as a norm

3. the third angel's bowl is poured out on rivers and springs, turning them to blood as vindication for the blood of the prophets and saints; this bowl symbolizes simple retribution, eye for an eye, or blood for blood

4. the fourth angel's bowl is poured out on the sun, causing men to be scorched, but not to repent of the sins that were being repaid now; back in 13:13, the emperor's illusionists had pretended to harness the sun and now their trickery was to be punished

5. the fifth angel's bowl struck the throne of the beast and his kingdom with darkness and pain, symbolizing the separation from God the heathen had chosen

6. the sixth angel's bowl is poured out on the Euphrates River to dry it up and make a clear path for invaders; a deterrent to invasion and source of false security are thus removed and vulnerability is multiplied

a. three unclean spirits like frogs issue from the mouths of the dragon, beast and false prophet

b. frogs were among the plagues upon Egypt and are viewed as a loathsome, noisy irritant; these amphibian spirits are the lies, blasphemies and propaganda that emerge from the mouths of the

emperor and his illusionists and enforcers

c. the voice of Christ interrupts the scene to remind John and his first century readers that all these things will come upon the empire as a thief in the night and in short order, so they should always be prepared; he has not in mind some final battle at the end of time, but an impending moment of truth in that era

d. Armageddon, or the mount of Megiddo, is offered as a symbol of the gathering place for this great battle between good and evil

1. Megiddo was the site of a dozen memorable battles in the Old Testament, including victories by Deborah and Gideon and defeats of Saul and Josiah

2. this battle of Armageddon only symbolizes the struggle of Christ and his redeemed against pagan Rome, a battle that Christianity was to win

3. it has no reference to anything beyond the local context of the book

7. the seventh angel's bowl is then poured into the air, accompanied by the voice of God declaring this scene of judgment completed

a. noisy symbols of awesome judgment begin and the city targeted by God is divided and conquered; refuges like mountains and islands are symbolically cut off to show that judgment upon paganism is unavoidable

b. as with the scorching sun and the body sores, even 90 pound hailstones do not make the blasphemers repent; hail is an old symbol of wrath (see Exodus 9:18-26, Joshua 10:11)

c. these plagues were not the final judgment of God, for blasphemers continued to live; they were a sign of judgment upon a generality of mankind involved in the deification of the Roman emperor

d. God's opinion of Rome and his plans for her are clear to the Christian listener in first century Asia Minor, but those plans are yet to be carried out; he must wait

II. Some Applications

A. Deliverance Is The Theme

1. deliverance is the theme of Revelation and of the entire Bible

a. God delivers Abraham from idolatry into a lifelong sojourn, then his twelve grandsons from drought and famine and then their descendants from Egyptian slavery

b. God uses Gideon and David and the prophets to deliver Israel from physical and spiritual bondage, but only his precious son, Jesus, is able to offer lasting deliverance (Galatians 1:3-5 and Second Corinthians 1:8-11)

2. this deliverance, however, can only be accomplished with your consent and cooperation, that is by submissive faith in the plan of deliverance (Romans 6:16-18, 3-6)

B. Plagues of Sin

1. plagues on Egypt were real, literal and observable, but the plagues upon Rome were figurative

2. the fact that they were figurative did not make them more bearable, however, for they afflicted the spirit more acutely than those in Egypt

3. sin always leads to a moral plague upon the sinner, a figurative leprosy that brings the agony of guilt and eats away at the conscience (Matthew 15:10-20)

a. Jeremiah speaks of a generation that lost the ability to blush, for there are two stages of a sinful life; in the first sin is discomfiting and so a decision must be made and in the second the decision has been made either to get accustomed to sin or flee from it

b. if you abide in sin and guilt can no longer be felt, you are in danger of being there forever

C. Refuge

1. when God's judgment is administered, no earthly refuge will protect you—not your friends or your money or even your home

2. Jonah found no solace in the sea and the Romans' impregnable mountains and unreachable islands were symbolically cut off when God targeted them for retribution

3. the only trustworthy refuge is Christ, the solid rock (Hebrews 6:17-19)

Conclusion

As the symbolic plagues were poured out on Rome, no refuge was left, for she had refused to repent of her idolatry and pressed forward with her persecutions of the saints. Through John, Jesus is consoling his brethren in Asia Minor with promises of vindication and comfort.

Revelation (22): Mother of Harlots

(Revelation 17:1-18)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The seven bowls of Armageddon have been poured out upon the world, according to Christ's first century prophecy, and judgment has begun to come upon the persecutors of the saints in Asia Minor, symbolized as awful beasts with evil images. Rome has been characterized symbolically as Babylon, that brutish state of old that afflicted God's people and then was punished herself. The second of two women appears here in the seventeenth chapter of Revelation. Before, the only woman obvious to the text was the one who gave birth to the man child-she represented God's faithful remnant people; now a second, a harlot, is introduced in clear opposition to the first. The first woman was identified with Jerusalem, but this woman stands with Babylon, or Rome. Who will prevail-the unrepentant harlot or the persecuted, but faithful, remnant?

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Harlot is Identified (Revelation 17:1-6)

1. the great harlot is seen sitting upon many waters, which symbolize many peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues, according to verse 15
 - a. like ancient Babylon, Rome's worldwide reach is described by her spanning the known world and owning the seas
 - b. this Rome is an empire, like Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon before her, and she is just as bloodthirsty in her efforts to maintain power
2. God had described immoral cities before as harlots, including Nineveh (see Nahum 3:1-4), Tyre (see Isaiah 23:15-17), ancient Babylon (see Isaiah 47:5-15) and Jerusalem (see Isaiah 1:21)
 - a. the prophets of old had foretold the falls of Israel and Judah by using harlotry as a metaphor for their idolatry, a spiritual adultery committed against their groom, Jehovah
 - b. a lust for sensual pleasure and material ambition form a harlotry against God that Rome sought to export to the world, including Asia Minor
 - c. the kings of the world are indicted in verse 2 for committing political, economic and religious whoredom with Rome in exchange for military peace
 - d. yet their enslaved citizens often loved to have it so, becoming drunk and addicted to the pleasures that flowed from the Roman way of life
3. the image of the harlot is suddenly transferred in verse 3 to a place upon a red beast, full of blasphemous names and having seven heads and 10 horns
 - a. she is still the harlot, only meeting her destiny now with the sea beast of chapter 13, the Roman worldwide empire
 - b. in other words, here, city meets empire
4. her attire in verse 4 is merely the cosmetic mask behind which she hides her seductive intentions and hellish consequences
 - a. her golden cup is not filled with the expected luxury or wealth, but the reality of abominations and uncleanness and fornication
 - b. how often are evils offered in harmless, even attractive vessels?
5. upon her forehead is written, "MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH"
 - a. like a scarlet letter, she is emblazoned with a symbol of her identity which cannot be denied
 - b. John's readers in the late first century would have understood this harlot to be nobody but the city of Rome
 - c. behind her makeup and baubles is her true identity and intention; she is drunk upon the blood of the martyred saints, rejoicing in their brutal deaths and John wonders with a great wonder how anything could be so sickening, but when sin is portrayed as it really is, there is no confusion about its shame

B. The Woman and The Beast (Revelation 17:7-14)

1. the angel recognized that John was curious about the harlot and so he offers to talk about the mystery of her and the beast that bore her
2. John will not be the last to wonder about them, for all whose names are not in the book of life would witness the beast smitten and then temporarily revived
 - a. perhaps this has reference to the succession of emperors, symbolized in the beast's seven heads, representing a complete list of kings
 - b. the seven mountains the harlot sat upon relate nicely to the seven hills that bordered the Tiber upon which Rome was built; she became known as the "seven-hilled city" and this figure seems to be one of the least subtle in all the book
3. the ten horns are allies of Rome in one way or another against Christianity; they are vassal kings who rule various ethnic provinces by Rome's mandate

C. The Harlot (Revelation 17:15-18)

1. the harlot is simply clarified in these verses; she is an empire which borders many waters and seas and rules many nations and tongues
2. the vassal kings mentioned before as allies of Rome are revealed to be doing so only under duress or ambition, not genuine loyalty
 - a. eventually, Rome's power would falter a bit and those vassals would seize the day to push for independence
 - b. evil would self-destruct under its own weight as Rome would be unable to quell rebellion throughout such a far-flung empire
3. God's purpose would be carried out by his using the vassals to inflate Rome to untenable proportions and then remove her forever as an impediment to the gospel

II. Some Applications

A. Spiritual Adultery

1. Hosea is among the group of prophets we tend to label "minor" in reference to their relative brevity; he became a living parable in God's hands to illustrate the ugliness of idolatry through his wife's adultery and harlotry against him
2. under the Old Testament, idolatry was mostly the very plain adoration of false gods and their graven or carved images
3. under the New Testament, such idolatry is still possible, but more often, it comes in subtler packages (James 4:1-6)
 - a. anything that displaces God from the throne of our hearts or invites him to share that seat is spiritual harlotry and cause for eventual divorcement of fellowship between him and man (Matthew 6:19-24)
 - b. covetousness is idolatry, according to the Holy Spirit (see Ephesians 5:5) and so is pride, selfish ambition and the lust of the eyes
4. when we put another deity in our hearts by thought or deed, we fornicate with the devil, with the world, with the thing we covet and God is offended (James 4:7-10)

B. Loving To Have It So

1. many of the citizens of the empire enjoyed the sensual pleasures that flowed from a Roman way of life, for there seemed to be no consequences to immorality
2. there will always be an element, even among the church, that prefers a form of religion soaked with self-indulgence (Jeremiah 5:30-31)
 - a. if a false prophet can convince people that faith does not preclude a little intoxication, a little pornography or a little bawdy talk, he will be a popular man
 - b. if the rulers of the church, the elders, can validate the looseness of immodest dress, stumbling block entertainment and worship innovations, they will enlarge their flock
 - c. yet the character of the flock will be altered, destroyed and so will they (see Zechariah 10)

Conclusion

The enemy is identified and portrayed in such an unlovely image that Christians are rather embarrassed for her. Rome's weakening and punishment are settled, but the question of when and how remains a bit mysterious. The Revelation continues in chapter 18.

Revelation (23): Judgment on Babylon

(Revelation 18:1-24)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

In the seventeenth chapter, a great city with worldwide appeal was marked for divine judgment. She was figuratively called “Babylon the Great” to compare her to that actual city of ancient times. The Babylon that concerned John and his readers was not yet in the history books, however; it was Rome with her blaspheming Caesar and world empire. Revelation 18 simply continues the description of God’s impending vengeance upon Rome.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Is Fallen, Is Fallen (Revelation 18:1-8)

1. although no time lapse is revealed—whether it be days or months or even years—the sequential chronology of these events remains in tact

a. after the things that transpired in chapter 17, Rome, the symbolic harlot of profligacy and immorality is humiliated and about to collapse in a puddle of her own uncleanness

b. yet another angel appears with the power from God to pronounce his sentence and execute his judgment against this Roman Babylon

2. the angel announces her fall as if it has already occurred, a prophetic custom that presupposes any prediction of God to be as good as done

a. the once marvelous woman, dressed in royalty and smugness, is reduced to rags and humiliation, because she used her powers to entice and persecute Christians

b. the angel relegates Rome to a habitation of demons, foul spirits and every unclean and hated bird; he borrows from the words of Isaiah to illustrate the merciless vengeance of God to come (see 21:9, 13:19-22)

3. the fornication committed with her by the other kings on Earth is not only a habitual sexual immorality, but also a whoredom of political alliances and Machiavellian compromise

a. Many had violated or even crucified their consciences when Rome came calling with promises of luxury and riches in one hand and a sword of extortion in the other

b. even the common people, the merchants in various nations, had shared in this self-serving attitude, which ostracized Christians from the marketplace

4. just then another voice sounds out and calls the saints of God to flee the embrace of Rome as Abraham had fled Haran and Lot had fled Sodom

a. he cannot compel them to leave the Roman empire, for the world was hardly large enough to accomplish such a feat then; he encourages them to flee the figure and lifestyle of Rome, the sins of the flesh and compromises of the world

b. the Christian who gives up his fight and is enticed by the Roman way of living just may end up in the cross hairs of divine vengeance himself

5. as God told Moses that Israel’s complaints from Egyptian bondage had reached his ears, so the angel assures John that the church’s cries from Roman bondage had touched him as well

a. the sweet incense of those prayers contrasted so strongly with the stench of blasphemy and forced apostasy that God’s patience was exhausted

b. Rome was about to learn the lesson of sowing and reaping; having sown the wind, she was about to reap a whirlwind

c. her arrogance is the same as every great empire; a sense of invulnerability overwhelms and she boasts even against God

d. the demise of the harlot will come suddenly because it is God who judges her

B. Kings and Merchants of the Earth (Revelation 18:9-19)

1. the kings of the Earth who had hated Rome’s extortion, but accepted it as the price of safety and luxury, will selfishly weep at her fall

2. the merchants will weep even more selfishly, for Rome’s demise will bring them great economic depression and no market for their goods especially, the luxuries

3. the market for cattle and slaves will suddenly dry up
4. the shipmasters and sailors who brought the goods from afar will find nowhere to offload their cargo, for the city will not be able to buy, and there will be no other great market to take her place
5. it is materialism and worship of the things that has brought them to this kind of destruction

C. Rejoice for Vengeance (Revelation 18:20)

1. back in chapter 11, the wicked on Earth had mocked the deaths of the two witnesses, but now the tables are turned
2. the people of God are not told to rejoice in death, but to find satisfaction in the defeat of evil
3. while the kings, merchants and sailors mourn and weep, the saints, apostles and prophets celebrate for the persecuted have been avenged and every opponent or worldly person has paid a price

D. Ripples From a Millstone (Revelation 18:21-24)

1. an angel symbolically casts a millstone into the sea to illustrate the rippling effects of Rome's ultimate fall
 - a. musicians, symbolic of joyous times; craftsmen, symbolic of a thriving market; and the millstone, symbolic of healthy sustenance, are silenced as the millstone's plunge ripples through the doomed empire
 - b. the homes of the wealthy had been lighted at night and Nero had even used some Christians as human torches in his gardens, but now they would be extinguished
 - c. wedding bliss will likewise fade away
2. three reasons are offered—her merchants had made materialism a popular form of idolatry, Rome's deceptive lifestyle had induced many to serve the flesh and she had spilled the blood of the saints

II. Some Applications

A. Have No Fellowship With Darkness

1. a generation before, the Hebrew writer had warned Jewish Christians not to desert the church to return to the fading promise of Judaism
2. now, another apostle is warning every Christian who lives within the borders of Caesar's empire not to compromise with his idolatry or his immoral ways
3. in a broader sense the warning holds true for every Christian in every nation in every age
 - a. we must avoid falling into the course of this world, being content to be part of a special kingdom (First Peter 4:1-5)
 - b. We must not have fellowship with sinful things, no matter how small they may seem (Ephesians 5:8-11)
 - c. we must be content to be separate (Second Corinthians 6:14-7:1)

B. No Innocent Bystanders

1. God was prepared to punish the saints who compromised with idolatry along with the infidels who reveled in it, as well as those who knew the right thing to do, but invariably did the thing most convenient or physically secure
2. when Jerusalem was invaded by the original Babylon in 586 B.C., the people of Edom publicly claimed neutrality while secretly helping the wicked conquerors (Obadiah 10-15)
3. in the last day of judgment, there will be no innocent bystanders—people without faith whose only hope is the claim that they never bothered those who did have faith (Second Thessalonians 1:3-10)

C. Materialism

1. sin is deceptive and materialism is among the hardest sins to identify for those who are ruled by it (First Timothy 6:6-10)
2. when you find yourself compromising your convictions, drifting away from your wife and losing quantity contact with your children, materialism should be considered first as a possible culprit.

Conclusion

Imagine the joyous expectation in Asia Minor as the churches' rhetors finish chapter 18. Were these promises 1900 years away from fulfillment, there would be little comfort, but the fact that God is promising to address their desperation shortly and dramatically brings them encouragement. Their blood will not be in vain.

Revelation (24): King of Kings and Lord of Lords

(Revelation 19:1-21)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

The eighteenth chapter of Christ's revelation to John and the saints of first century Asia Minor lent them comfort in its prediction of divine judgment upon their Roman persecutors. We read the book today as a collection of signs and symbols which have been not only revealed but fulfilled in the fall of the Roman empire. As we arrive in the nineteenth chapter, we witness the conclusion of the harlot city's demise and the glorious appearance of the conqueror, King of kings and Lord of lords.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Judging the Harlot (Revelation 19:1-10)

1. the harlot who is judged in this passage is Rome and her brutal, inhuman, immoral presence; her predicted fall is a cause for great joy among the saints who have suffered indignities and persecution at her hands

a. while her accomplices in the market, on the sea and in various vassal states bemoan the loss of prosperity that will follow her fall, the people of God answer "Alleluia" for the execution of God's vengeance

b. "Alleluia" occurs only here in the New Testament and is a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase "Praise Ye Yah"; it is a word that takes God's name in vain when used carelessly as is common today

2. as the nineteenth psalm says, so Revelation 19 agrees—God's judgments are true and righteous altogether

a. gone will be the smoke of Christians burning in Nero's garden, to be replaced by the exhaust from Rome's fall from power

b. three groups shout praise to God for his retribution upon their troublers—the great multitude, the living creatures and elders and the saints on Earth

c. apprehension had centered upon the fear that God had bowed to Caesar like Baal had bowed to him in the Old Testament; this series of events dispels that fear completely

3. a third woman joins the radiant one of chapter 12 and the harlot of chapter 17

a. she is the Lamb's bride, really the radiant woman from before in a new symbol; she is the church to be joined to Christ in heaven

1. now she is only betrothed to him, as Mary was to Joseph when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, but then the church will join her groom

2. Paul wrote, "I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (Second Corinthians 11:2)

3. even the phrase here in verse 7, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad" is reminiscent of Christ's admonition in Matthew 5:12 to endure persecution for great is the reward in heaven

b. to see the bride standing beside the harlot would make the contrast between Rome and the church very clear

1. the harlot dressed in the gaudy, provocative attire of a carnal addict while the bride wears the bright, pure and fine linen of righteousness

2. when the church is wed to Christ, she will not have spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but will be holy and without blemish (see Ephesians 5:27)

c. the bride, then is not one person, but represents the entire population of the redeemed from start to finish

1. all such individuals who compose this bride are invited to the marriage supper by the gospel message and respond in faithful, grateful submission (Second Thessalonians 2:13-17)

2. the feast will be described in chapter 21; for now, only the invitations have been mailed

4. John is overcome by emotion and perhaps gets confused and falls down to worship the angel, who rejects his adoration

a. it is amazing how easily idols and improper objects of worship can be mistaken for true objects of adoration

- b. there is an insidious subtlety about idols that so often conceals itself in even religious robes
- c. this angel has done no wrong, but John has, and his wrong serves as a warning to us—worship

God!

B. Faithful and True (Revelation 19:11-16)

1. although the harlot has been destroyed, the two great enemies of God and man, the beast and false prophet remain in place in ultimate service to Satan
2. this passage, then is still not a description of the second coming of Christ, for the circumstances in first century Rome have not been concluded yet
3. Christ appears on a white horse, a conqueror who inspires confidence as God's faithful and true witness
 - a. his eyes burn and penetrate the hearts of men, judging their motives and character beyond their actual words and deeds
 - b. his realm extends beyond that of Satan, for he wears many diadems, or crowns, upon his head
 - c. the unknown name may signify his relationship with God, but since it is unknown, it is futile to speculate; John finally tells us that he is the Word as he was described back in the first chapter of John's gospel record and the King of kings and Lord of lords, as Paul had called him (First Timothy 6:13-16)
 - d. his robe is stained with his enemies' blood, symbolic of their judgment
4. he is not alone, for the armies of heaven are likewise assembled in white robes upon their white stallions
 - a. the sword of his mouth is his word, which saves the faithfully obedient and slays those who do not know God and those who refuse to obey the gospel (see Second Thessalonians 1)
 - b. his rod signifies his authority, the power to break men with a rod of iron and to dash them in pieces like pottery (see Psalm 2:9)
 - c. he is prepared to tread the winepress of wrath, a symbol borrowed from Isaiah 63:1-6

C. The Awful Supper (Revelation 19:17-18)

1. in the great battle between the faith and paganism, the victory of the worthy Lamb will be complete and total
2. a lone angel captures the attention of the universe from his perspective on the sun, symbolically calling the scavenger birds of the Earth to prepare to feast upon the carcasses of those who had troubled the early church
3. Ezekiel, likewise, had been instructed to call birds and beasts to dine upon God's sacrifice of the heathen (see Ezekiel 38-39)

D. Battle (Revelation 19:19-21)

1. the beastly Roman Empire summons his royal allies and their armies to this decisive battle, the battle of Armageddon which they had prepared for, but not fought, back in chapter 16
 - a. Armageddon is a term attached today to the prospects of a third world war with nuclear arms or to the second coming of Christ, but in the Bible, it only describes God's resounding judgment upon the Roman Empire that tried to destroy the early church
 - b. the King of kings and Lord of lords will emerge victorious over the beast, which never represented anything but modern, but was indicative of ancient Rome
2. even now a battle is not actually described, for Christ is too powerful!
 - a. before the battle can really heat up, the invincible Christ captures the beast and his false prophet and casts them into a lake of fire and brimstone to join their harlot mistress
 - b. the false prophet had assisted Caesar by deceiving his citizens into worshiping their monarch as a deity
 - c. there was never any threat that Christ would lose this battle; his victory is resounding and as quick as he decided to wage it
 - d. emperor worship is thus terminated and even today, it does not exist
3. Armageddon has been fought and won by Christ and as a result, paganism emanating from the Roman throne has been eliminated
4. Daniel's vision from 500 years before has been realized (Daniel 7:1-12)

II. Some Applications

A. Vengeance Belongs To God

1. we are all sorely tempted at times to seek out our own vengeance when someone insults us, or gossips about us, or cuts us off in traffic
2. imagine how tempted these brethren must have been to seek out their own vengeance upon their persecutors
3. yet God assures them that vengeance belongs to him alone (Romans 12:17-21)
 - a. as sure as Achan was punished for stealing the wares of Jericho, so we reserve ourselves for judgment when we steal the right of vengeance from God
 - b. personal vengeance is evidence of impatience, which God cannot reward (James 5:1-8)

B. Alleluia

1. we noted that the word "Alleluia" contains the name of God within it
2. it becomes then a sanctified word, like his name itself, and we must be more careful how we use it, not just pronouncing it carelessly when the Rangers win a game or our children clean up their room (Matthew 12:33-37)

C. Without Spot or Blemish

1. if the church is the bride of Christ and individuals compose the bride and the church will be wed to Christ without spot or blemish, it must then be important for us to live holier lives than what it easy or selfish (James 1:21-27)
2. daily self-examination and humble repentance must become our lifestyle (First John 1:5-10)

Conclusion

The victory over Rome has been secured in prophecy and history tells us that Christ delivered in the years that followed the giving of this Revelation. Much more remains in the book, however, including some of the most perplexing and promising texts in all the Bible. What do the thousand years represent? Chapter 20 begins to explain the aftermath of the Armageddon battle already won.

Revelation (25): The Thousand Years

(Revelation 20:1-15)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

For many centuries, the twentieth chapter of Revelation has been used as the basis for various theories about a literal thousand year reign of Christ on Earth. What we actually see, though, is a passage with seven parts, each begun with the phrase, "And I saw," which describes the aftermath of the defeat of the beast and false prophet that embodied the old Roman empire. As Caesar and his allies in the world had been predicted for defeat, the devil was losing his closest allies in the fight against the faith. What becomes of the tempter and the persevering saints is the main subject of this chapter.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Thousand Years Begun (Revelation 20:1-6)

1. the angel who appears in verse one is not Jesus, but another ministering servant, who holds the key to the abyss, or bottomless pit, and a strong chain with which to bind Satan
 - a. earlier, John had observed a fallen star who was given the key to this pit and power to open it and inflict upon Earth smoke and a scourge of locusts (see 9:1-3)
 - b. that same key has been transferred to this angel who now has the power to close and seal the abyss that had been opened like a Pandora's box of misery
 - c. the key and chain are symbolic of authority and restriction, under which Satan is about to go with the demise of his influence through Rome
2. Satan's four monikers from Revelation 12:9 are repeated here
 - a. he is the dragon, strong and ferocious to an almost mythic degree
 - b. he is the old serpent, a cunning deceiver
 - c. he is the devil, accuser and slanderer of men from Job to John
 - d. he is Satan, man's adversary and the opponent of everything noble
3. Satan is caught by the angel and bound for 1000 years
 - a. 1000 is one of the book's most clearly symbolic numbers, here representing a complete, but undetermined period of time, in which he will remain active and dangerous, but like a dog chained between two trees
 - b. the chained Satan can operate only within the limits of his perimeter, which Christians and infidels enter at their own risk
4. during this symbolically long period of time, Satan is to be held in the abyss, unable to deceive the nations as he had during Caesar's slavery to him
 - a. the abyss is the abode of demons and Satan's presence there was to prevent him from controlling nations as he had before (see Luke 8:31); the abyss is not his final sentence, for that comes later
 - b. in Revelation's simple chronology, the period of persecution that had been described variously as 1260 days, three and one half years, or time, times and half a time has come to an end with the last martyr's death
 - c. the saints beneath the altar have rested their little time waiting for the fulfillment of their course and now God is bringing this paganism that killed them to its own end
 - d. this thousand year moment of victory symbolizes the beginning of the reign of the emperor, Constantine, who ended persecution and legalized Christianity
5. after the devil is restrained, John sees the souls of the martyrs and those who had managed to live faithfully on Earth as they sat upon thrones
 - a. judgment is committed to this elite and exclusive group and they have exercised it as the beast, false prophet, harlot and tempter have been either punished or restrained
 - b. remember that the book's context keeps even this image in the understanding of first century Christians who were looking for comfort in their persecution by Rome
6. the rest of the dead are the wicked servants of the devil through their allegiance to Rome; they have no part in the images of victory
 - a. the "first resurrection" is not a bodily raising, but a resurrection of the cause of Christ through

the saints and martyr's vindication over Rome

b. Isaiah (see 26:19), Hosea (see 13:14) and Ezekiel (see 37:1-14) had used similar language to describe Israel's triumph over idolatry and captivity as a resurrection of their cause from apparent incurable death (Ezekiel 37:1-14)

7. a beatitude is pronounced upon those who had part in the first resurrection, the vindication of Christ's cause in the empire

a. they will find that the second death has no power over them, that they will not have to face a spiritual sentence to the lake of fire

b. they shall be priests of God and Christ, worshiping him personally

c. they shall reign with him during this entire period of the devil's restriction

B. Thousand Years Conclude (Revelation 20:7-10)

1. Satan's attitude toward the savior is unchanged during this long, complete period of restriction, but he is loosed at the end anyway for a little time (see verse 3)

a. the period of victory has lasted now more than a literal thousand years and will come to a close when there are not enough saints left on Earth to justify its continued existence

b. without the good leavening influence of a strong population of Christians, the Earth will deteriorate into iniquity and beg God for the end to come

2. unbound, Satan will come forth without the old Roman empire to use in his objectives

a. instead, he will employ his power of deception throughout the Earth and with the assistance of nations from the four corners of the globe

b. Gog and Magog are borrowed from Ezekiel as symbols of all the evil that would cast itself against God's truth

c. they are not literal nations, but attitudes, theories and amendments to truth that seek to overthrow it and doom men to punishment, including communism, humanism, astrology, materialism and atheism

d. this looming battle is not literal, but spiritual, and fought daily as we see respect for the Bible decline around the world

3. one last attempt is made by wicked men to do the devil's bidding and abolish the church

a. Christians will feel like they are surrounded by nefarious enemies and paganism will make a comeback without the emperor

b. the worship of self and creature will rise in popularity and Christians will find themselves in increasing derision

c. as in the fall of Rome, however, God will bring the last group of Christians to victory as well, so long as they live faithfully unto death

4. finally, the devil, the deceiver of Eve and Elymas, will be cast into the lake of fire with his ancient allies to face torment forever and ever

a. he will not be the ruler of hell, but its most noteworthy prisoner (Matthew 25:41-46)

b. the torment is eternal in duration

C. Great White Throne (Revelation 20:11-15)

1. this passage marks an important transition in the book of Revelation

a. we have concerned ourselves with things that were shortly to come to pass when John wrote about them to benefit his beleaguered readers in first century Asia Minor

b. the twentieth chapter of this long vision has shown them their victory, celebrated in a symbolic thousand years during which paganism would not trouble the church as it formerly had, but then had also looked forward to the end of that period to Satan's last gasp against the modern church

2. now the chapter ends with something that was not shortly to come to pass for those early saints and may not even be for us—the final judgment day

3. Christ is prophesied as sitting upon a great white throne to judge the living and the dead

a. Earth and its atmosphere, so necessary for our present order, but so unnecessary in that blessed future, meet their end (Second Peter 3:10-12)

b. the psalmist wrote, "Of old You laid the foundation of the earth, And the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will endure; Yes they will all grow old like a garment; Like a cloak you will change them, and they will be changed" (102:25-27)

4. a literal resurrection of all who ever lived has occurred and each one takes his turn standing before the judgment seat to hear his sentence pronounced (Second Corinthians 5:10)

- a. the books are symbolic of the histories of each person's life, the omniscience of God who makes each eternal determination
- b. the book of life, which contains the names of all the faithful, is also present
- 5. the sea generally symbolizes the mass of human society and so the living are indeed present with the dead at this final tribunal (First Thessalonians 4:13-18)
 - a. death had held the bodies while hades held the spirits of the dead, but now both are given back for the resurrection
 - b. judgment, you must note, is according to a man's works in relation to God's loving commandments; "For God will bring every work into judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil" (Ecclesiastes 13:14)
- 6. death, the last enemy to be destroyed, is destroyed, being thrown into the lake of fire along with those whose names were not enrolled in the book of life
 - a. the second death is spiritual, eternal, incurable
 - b. Alford writes, "As there is a second, higher life, so there is also a second, deeper death. And as after that life there is no more death, so after that death there is no more life (see 735)"

II. Some Applications

A. Premillennialism

- 1. the doctrine of Premillennialism so popularized by the "Left Behind" series of fictional works, interprets this passage quite differently, stripping it and the book away from the first century and presuming that ours is the last generation to read it
- 2. Premillennialism is summarized as follows
 - a. Christ will come in the first phase of his return in the Rapture, raising the righteous dead from their tombs and snatching the righteous living out of their cars and beds to meet him in the air
 - b. then will come a period of great tribulation on Earth, after which he and the church will return to Earth, in the revelation to set up his kingdom from David's literal throne in Jerusalem
 - c. he will reign there for a millennium, during which the Jews will convert en masse and return to Palestine to restore Old Testament worship and usher in a period of peace and idealism
 - d. after exactly 1000 years, Satan will be loosed to make war on the saints and the wicked dead will rise to meet their judgment when he is finally defeated
- 3. the theory must read the following into Revelation 20:1-10, however, for these items so necessary to Premillennialism are not found there:
 - a. the second coming of Christ
 - b. a bodily resurrection
 - c. a reign of Christ on Earth
 - d. the literal throne of David
 - e. Jerusalem of Palestine
 - f. the conversion of the Jews
 - g. the church on Earth
- 4. instead, this passage deals with the binding of Satan at the end of the period of Roman persecution of the church
 - a. this symbolic period of time is one of victory for the saints, but the devil will continue to tempt them without being able to deceive whole nations
 - b. it will end just before the final judgment when God decides that enough is enough and brings the Earth to its end
 - e. the thousand years is not future, it is present and symbolic

B. Satan

- 1. today, Satan is bound, for he cannot practice demon possession as he did in the first century and he cannot deceive whole nations like he did Rome
- 2. but he is not powerless (First Peter 5:8-10)
- 3. you must be as strong as your ancient brethren to keep your name in the book of life (James 4:7-10)

Conclusion

A Revelation chronology has begun with a time, times and half a time of persecution, followed by a thousand year period of victory celebrated on Earth. When God declared that time was up, Satan was

briefly loosed and then permanently bound and the final judgment commenced eternal Heaven and Hell for billions of souls, both the living and the dead. The chapters to follow flesh out eternity to encourage readers of every age.

Revelation (26): New Heaven and Earth

(Revelation 21:1-8)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

All the fear, torment and discouragement of the saints of God has passed. Only those who choose to live in immorality or who tamper with this book receive any warning or cause for concern in the last two chapters. The Revelation prophecy has passed its climax and now begins to settle into its aftermath, a description of the church's fate after persecution has subsided. In shadows and small measures, these chapters apply to the militant church on Earth that has emerged from tribulation in tact, but the fullness of this part of John's prophecy has reference to the triumphant church's eternal home in heaven. As Paul comforted his readers in Thessalonica four decades earlier with images of heaven to come (see First Thessalonians 4:13-18), so John encourages those of turn-of-the-century Asia Minor with these signs and symbols of their future. While all else is Revelation has been fulfilled long ago in the decline of the Roman Empire, what follows in these two chapters is a description of the second coming of Christ and its aftermath in eternity.

Discussion

I. The Text (Revelation 21:1-8)

A. New Heaven and Earth

1. in a limited, figurative sense, the old heaven and Earth would pass away when Roman persecution finally subsided with Emperor Constantine

a. that is, the current, harsh system of things on Earth would be replaced by a new, kinder and more pleasant arrangement among men and saints

b. gone would be the emperor worship enforcement committee and Caesar's human torches in his gardens

2. in fact, there are three Bible prophets who utilized the phrase "new heaven and Earth" to make predictions about important shifts in society

a. Isaiah used those words when talking about the transition from fleshly Israel to spiritual Israel as God's bride (Isaiah 65:17-25)

1. God's holy mountain of verse 25 is defined in Isaiah 2:2-4 as the Zion of Messiah's rule, the church of Jesus Christ

2. so, when Isaiah used the phrase, he used it to describe the establishment of the church of Christ

b. Peter also used the phrase, but to describe the second coming of Christ and the removal of the church to heaven (Second Peter 3:10-13)

1. the church was established decades before and Peter's terminology has more to do with judgment and punishment than Isaiah's

2. Peter was discussing another shift in society, but the final one, from Earth to heaven

3. his new heavens and Earth phrasing is borrowed from Isaiah as a figure of speech for man's new arrangement, in heaven

c. finally, John uses those words to describe the same shift from a church among persecutors and troublers to a church unblemished and unharmed in heaven

B. New Jerusalem

1. this new Jerusalem is new in terms of kind (*kainos*), being superior to the earthly Jerusalem which preceded her

a. while the Jerusalem on Earth is treated as a holy and historic city today, the new Jerusalem is capital of the new heaven and Earth (Hebrews 12:22-24)

b. the Jerusalem which now is corresponds to bondage and the flesh, while the Jerusalem above is free, the mother of all who are saved (see Galatians 4:25-26)

2. this is the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God, the city that the patriarchs believed was to come (see Hebrews 11:10)

3. the symbolism continues however, for New Jerusalem is compared to a bride, dressed in white and adorned for her wedding

- a. formerly, she was only betrothed to her groom, Jesus Christ (see Second Corinthians 11:2),
- b. now she is to be presented to him without spot, wrinkle or blemish (see Ephesians 5:25-27)

C. Tabernacle of God

1. an unidentified voice sounds from the area of the throne; his is a voice that employs and binds together all the symbols of the church of Christ
 - a. she is the bride of Christ, the sanctuary of God, the family of the Lord and a body composed of saved individuals
 - b. since Eden, God has been redeveloping the possibility of walking among his creatures again as he had then and now that plan has come to fruition
2. the voice emphasizes through repetition that, in this new order, God will again dwell among men and be with them in a way superior to the old order on Earth
 - a. the end of the old order meant the abolition of crying, death, mourning and pain
 - b. it was sin that caused them and sin and death have been swallowed up by ultimate victory in resurrection
3. this prediction is as faithful and true as was Christ

D. Overcoming or Overcome

1. God reminds us that all this is yet future, now only prophecy, but then fulfillment
2. in the interim, he continues to dispense his grace where he wishes and to offer unto all men drink from the fountain of the water of life
 - a. this he offered to the Samaritan woman at the well (see 4:10) and all who were thirsty for more than something to quench their fleshly desire
 - b. this kind of refreshment is found in heaven in full measure, flowing from the river of life beside God's throne
3. the theme of overcoming that appeared in the seven letters of Christ at the onset of this long Revelation returns here again
 - a. they who overcome the trials and tribulations of life will enjoy the inheritance of a son of God—an estate that includes everlasting life and an unending period of pure joy, never interrupted by the agonies of life in the old order on Earth
 - b. we are made heirs by adoption when we obey the gospel (Galatians 4:1-7)
4. but not all overcome; some are overcome themselves by sin and are doomed to an eternity in the lake of fire and brimstone, which is the second death
 - a. the cowardly are they who shrink back to perdition because they so fear doing battle with Satan that they simply surrender through compromise or inactivity
 - b. the unbelieving are they who betray the trust committed to them by faith, turning their backs on Christ after they change their minds when the cost rises
 - c. the abominable go further and embrace the profane practices of this world, espousing fornication, lust and other vices
 - d. the murderers are those who take away the life of others unlawfully
 - e. sexually immoral persons include those who incite lust as well as those who engage it
 - f. sorcerers include astrologers, new age gurus and all those who claim powers they do not have, deceiving those who might otherwise have been saved
 - g. idolaters worship false gods, like icons and statues, or even food and money
 - h. liars practice deceit, whether blatant or subtle, through big lies or little white ones

II. Some Applications

A. Being The Bride

1. under the Old Covenant, the earthly nation of Israel was the bride of God
 - a. she committed adultery with the idols of this world, including Molech and Baal
 - b. finally, God divorced her after centuries of longsuffering and warning
2. he betrothed himself to a second wife, whom he would wed only when she was proven to be pure and holy (Ephesians 5:25-27)
 - a. this is a prophecy about the second coming of Christ and to take part, we must strive to smooth away our immoral blemishes by faith, perseverance and repentance (First Peter 1:13-16)
 - b. ironically, as our faces and bodies gain more wrinkles and blemishes with the passing years, our spirits should become less troubled with the spots of iniquity as we turn back the temper more

frequently than he deceives us

3. being part of the bride of Christ on their wedding day requires a determination to rise above temptation, not a contentment with being ruled by it

B. Our Inheritance

1. in this passage and its fulfillment on judgment day is where every passage about storing up treasure and making preparation is finished

a. treasure is ours (Matthew 6:19-24)

b. it forms an incorruptible, secure inheritance (First Peter 1:3-9)

2. here is where crowns of righteousness are distributed to all those who anxiously anticipated his return and adored his appearance (see Second Timothy 4:8, Hebrews 9:27-28)

a. when heirs receive an inheritance on Earth, it always follows immediately after the sad death of a dear loved one

b. with this inheritance, the death was long ago and it is the death of death itself that delivers the gift

Conclusion

The image of the new heaven and Earth is promising and beautiful and we have only now scratched the surface of what John will write.

Revelation (27): The Lamb's Wife

(Revelation 21:9-27)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

John's description of the vision he saw of a new heaven and earth continues through the remainder of chapter 21. It is not the heavenly home of God which is being replaced, but the atmosphere and terrain of Earth that are being replaced by a new home in God's heaven. Jesus went back there to prepare a place for us and this chapter uses signs and symbols to reveal what it will be like, especially in contrast to the world of persecution the early Christians were living in. The temptation with this passage has always been to literalize it and imagine heaven as if the symbols were valuable for their earthly wealth and not their symbolic meaning of spiritual reward. Even the image of a mansion from Christ's words was not meant to stimulate carnal covetousness, but spiritual expectation. In this chapter, we see the church triumphant, in its glorified state with God.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The Bride of Christ (Revelation 21:9-14)

1. one of the seven plague angels returns to show John the bride of Christ in all her unblemished splendor

a. having dispensed with the harlot in her unclean seduction, the bride of Christ is a spotless virgin, arrayed in purity and white for the end of her betrothal and the beginning of an eternal union with her groom, Jesus himself

b. as the Old Testament wed Jehovah to fleshly Israel, so the New Testament weds Christ to spiritual Israel, the church

2. this passage opens as the chapter did, and is a recapitulation of the arrival of the bride, which had been interrupted by some words of final judgment

3. remember that these descriptions are as symbolic as the dragon and harlot were; they are not literal, but suggest something even better than the signs

a. the symbolic city is lit in a way that would be like walking around inside a diamond on a sunny day (see verse 11)

b. the city is enclosed with walls, broken up only by 12 gates overseen by angels, symbolizing security and protection in God's bosom (see Hebrews 1:14)

c. those saved by the retrospective working of Christ's blood from under the Old Testament are symbolized here

1. the walls themselves had 12 foundations inscribed with the names of the 12 apostles, thus uniting the saved of the Old Testament with those of the New

2. the number 12 is used symbolically here of the fulness of those involved, including Matthias and Paul and the others who laid the church's foundation by preaching the gospel in the first century

B. Measurements and Materials (Revelation 21:15-21)

1. back in chapter 11, the church militant upon Earth had been symbolically measured by a seer with an ordinary reed; now a golden reed is employed by the angel to measure the church triumphant, the holy city

2. its foursquare measurements and other proportions confound our imagination, for the city would be literally 1500 miles in length, breadth and height

a. a literal measurement is not the point, however; this new Jerusalem is simply grand and magnificent and unparalleled in human history

b. the wall measures 218 feet high according to the angel, certainly secure although nothing remains in the universe to assault it

c. it is made of jasper, a sparkling stone and the entire city was golden in nature, as well, but of a kind that also sparkled like glass

3. the foundations of the city's walls are inlaid with the most precious stones of John's time

a. jasper is thought to be the diamond

- b. sapphire is a blue and very hard stone
- c. chalcedony is green stone
- d. emerald is yet another green stone
- e. sardonyx was a kind of onyx highly valued as a cameo setting
- f. sardius was either yellowish brown or red
- g. chrysolite was probably a gold jasper or yellow beryl
- h. beryl was sea-green
- topaz had a green tint as well
- j. chrysoprase was a paler beryl
- h. jacinth is probably another sapphire, transparent blue
- amethyst is a purplish red stone, almost like wine
- 4. the beautiful rainbow of color on the foundation is contrasted with the simple elegance of the famed pearl gates and golden street
 - a. each gate was one enormous pearl
 - b. street probably refers to street material and includes all streets that make up such a city

C. No Temple In It (Revelation 21:22-27)

- 1. the center of old Jerusalem had been the temple of Solomon, but the center of New Jerusalem is God himself, without anymore need for symbols of his presence or divine manifestations of his power
 - a. the promise of Revelation 3:12 has been fulfilled—those who overcame have become pillars in God’s temple, permanent worshipers in the sanctuary of the I AM
 - b. even the sun and moon are superfluous where God provides the light from his immediate being
- 2. the people and nations in the holy city refer to the fact that men and women have been redeemed from every corner of the globe and out of every nation, regardless of its overall condition; the kingdoms of men have been eliminated and all their glory has been conceded to Christ
- 3. the gates to the kingdom of Christ have always remained open to those who would obey him and become his citizens
 - a. now in heaven, the triumphant church’s gates are left open as well, for there is no more threat from infidels
 - b. yet now, the gospel invitation has even expired
- 4. John repeats the warning of verse 8 that nothing unclean or sinful can enter in

II. Some Applications

A. Heaven Will Surely Be Worth It All

- 1. prior to his ascension, Jesus promised hope to his followers (John 14:1-6)
- 2. no matter what tries to deter us in this life, heaven will surely be worth it all
 - a. don’t let the fact that these things are symbols in Revelation dissuade you, for the blessings they symbolize are superior to gold, pearls and diamonds
 - b. the upward call of God in Christ Jesus is our chief and only meaningful objective and all else must be judged according to its relation to that
 - c. no compromise of that goal is worth making

B. Preaching People Into Heaven At Their Funerals

- 1. parts of this passage are often read at funerals to assure the living that their loved one is bound for a better place, but no one can preach a dead man into heaven who was not bound there already while breath remained in his lungs
- 2. Heaven cannot be earned, but Hell can and if you refuse the invitation of Christ to believe and be baptized, don’t expect the requirements of the gospel to be changed out of respect for you (see Acts 10:34-35)
- 3. now is the time to make your reservations for heaven (Second Corinthians 5:1-11)
 - a. no unclean thing will enter there
 - b. are you cleansed by the blood of Christ?

Conclusion

Only one chapter of this Revelation remains, but it will not change anything we have read thus far. Are you ready to meet your Maker if he comes tonight?

Revelation (28): Tree of Life

(Revelation 22:1-5)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Chapters 21 and 22 really should not be read separately, but in the interest of time for our study, we have been required to make many starts and stops. Rest assured that the original audience in persecuted first century Asia Minor would not have rested until every word was read and understood. They were the ones under tribulation because of their faith and praying for comfort and hope. The apocalyptic imagery in this book about wars and dragons and a harlot dealt with their trial in the Roman empire, not the last days of mankind. Now in the final few chapters, John's pen is recording the culmination of their hope for heaven, a hope that we share as their brethren. The first five verses of this chapter punctuate the description of the church triumphant from the previous chapter—a city with true foundations whose builder and maker is God. Now, John is shown a river and tree of life, which epitomize the existence of the redeemed in heaven forever. What mankind lost in Eden, he regains in Heaven!

Discussion

I. The Text

A. The River of Life (Revelation 22:1-5)

1. the first thing John sees after considering the gates of heaven is its pure river flowing with living water
2. Eden had a river, as well, which watered the garden and then divided into four rivers as it flowed outward
3. this river in Heaven contains water of a superior quality, for it sustains life in its fullness after life has been redefined as completely spiritual and devoid of fleshly frailty
 - a. Jesus had promised this very water that John now sees to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:5-14)
 - b. while on Earth, this living water flowed through the presence and influence of the Holy Spirit (see John 7:38), but in Heaven it is only more readily available and abundant
4. because it flows from the throne of Jehovah and his son, it is unpolluted like earthly streams
 - a. Ezekiel had seen a similar vision, but in his, the river issued from the temple and flowed to the Dead Sea (see 47:1-12)
 - b. Joel (see 3:18) and Zechariah (see 14:8) also saw visions of rivers which foresaw the spiritual kingdom of the Messiah in its establishment and militant states; John sees a river for the church triumphant when persecution and trial have ended

B. The Tree of Life

1. the tree of life had been planted in Eden so that man could take of its fruit and live beyond his natural mortality
 - a. when Adam and Eve sinned, immortality on Earth was instantly turned into a negative thing, for man would be compelled to live among temptation forever
 - b. an eternity amidst sin and corruption was prevented by God's tough love in expelling the couple from Eden and cutting off access to that tree of life on Earth
2. access to the tree of life is regained in John's vision of Heaven
 - a. the Ephesians had been promised its fruit in their letter from Christ, if they overcame the devil and returned to their first love (see Revelation 2:7)
 - b. the promise was not for them only, but all who would overcome temptation and remain near their savior, for salvation is attached to the cursed tree upon which Jesus hung for our sins as well
3. its 12 crops of fruit refer to its consistency and unending produce
 - a. the fruit of life is what Adam and Eve should have been content to eat in the garden when the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was presented to them
 - b. that temptation will not exist in heaven, when this tree alone provides the food of life
4. its leaves are said to be for the healing of the nations; the disparities and differences that divided people on Earth will be eliminated in Heaven

C. No More Curse

1. God's temporal judgments on mankind began in Eden, when he cursed Adam with sweaty labor and Eve with painful childbirth
2. the curses continued upon Cain for murdering Abel and upon all others who violated God's law
3. under the gospel, the curse of the law was removed by Christ (see Galatians 3:13), and grace became a viable alternative to doom because of sin (Romans 6:20-23)
 - a. nothing accursed can abide in the presence of God and for this reason, apostates on Earth willfully depart from him
 - b. in Heaven, apostasy is abolished along with the curse, and the saved serve God right before his throne

D. Behold Him Face To Face

1. we will be near to God that we might finally behold him face to face (First John 3:1-3)
2. on Earth, man would have died if he had seen God face to face, but not then
3. the former reign of Christians with their savior was limited by figures and time, but in Heaven, it is eternal and unthreatened
4. there Christ continues to light their world by his glory

II. Some Applications

A. Way to Immortality

1. the promise of immortality, eternal life, is renewed through Jesus who broke through the gates of hades which imprisoned the dead and made possible the resurrection of the faithful to live forever beyond this defiled plain
2. still, salvation is not universal, but conditional upon the response of man to the invitation of the gospel to gather around the cross (Matthew 7:13-14, 21-23)
3. as Peter responded when many of Christ's disciples turned away for love of this present world, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).
 - a. it was the words of God, spoken directly to Adam and Eve, that permitted them to eat of the tree of life in Eden
 - b. it is the words of God, spoken to us through Christ, that will lead us to the tree of life again
4. the Bible says that Jesus "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (Second Timothy 1:10)
 - a. it depends upon the pattern of faithful obedience (First Timothy 1:15-17)
 - b. it is contained in "a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (Second Corinthians 5:1)

B. Inheriting The Earth

1. one of the most memorable beatitudes from the sermon on the mount promised that the meek would inherit the Earth
2. this phrase was a Jewish axiom that took God's Canaan promise to Abraham and broadened it to apply to the fullness of God's blessings
 - a. inheriting the Earth, or land in a better translation, referred to the conquest of Canaan and the condition that Israel be submissive to Jehovah's will in the matter
 - b. when Jesus used the phrase, Canaan had already been conquered and lost by Israel and so his use of those words was figurative, not literal
3. Jesus promised blessing upon the meek like him who would be rewarded with a new heaven and Earth, a new Jerusalem, a new home beside a river of living water and a tree of life
 - a. the meek are those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life
 - b. their reward is the Heavenly paradise we see before us in these chapters

Conclusion

If you miss Heaven, you have missed the only thing that matters. The alternative is too ghastly even to consider, so live by faith that your election might be made sure.

Revelation (29): Come, Lord Jesus!

(Revelation 22:6-21)

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

As the Revelation of Jesus Christ to the Apostle John of Patmos draws to a close, the Lord combines the ultimate eternal promise of heaven with stark reminders of the dangers of the day. His original audience in persecution-stricken first century Asia Minor truly lived in the midst of the worst threat in the history of the faith, but many of them persevered and met their reward. We draw inspiration from their strength in this book the same way we do from Joshua and Caleb, who sought Canaan the way we seek Heaven. The final 16 verses of this great book of symbols and promises remind those persecuted saints that God was coming quickly to comfort them and would eventually conquer their troublers. With the benefit of safe retrospection, the passage promises us that God keeps his vows and will keep the one made to us about eternity.

Discussion

I. The Text

A. Faithful and True (Revelation 22:6-13)

1. as the curtain on Earth's drama was raised in Eden, it has now fallen in Heaven; the tree of life which was lost there has been regained beyond the clouds

a. man's adversary has been finally conquered and relegated to eternal torment with his angels and the souls of men he managed he deceive and enlist

b. sickness, death, sorrow and tears have been abolished among the righteous, who dwell with God in his very presence

2. more immediately, for the first generation of readers, the Roman persecution has been predicted to end one day and God's abiding care has been proven in a faithful and true prophecy

3. the question on the lips of every fearful saint so long ago must have been when and they are reminded that God's answer is shortly to come to pass

a. that phrase did not have reference to the second coming of Christ, nor the banishment of Satan himself, but the conflict between Christ and Caesar described at length in the book

b. comfort was coming and its signs would begin appearing shortly

4. the sixth of seven Revelation beatitudes promises a blessing on those who keep the words of the prophecy of this book; once more, obedience is shown to be integral to genuine faith; this prophecy demanded loyalty without compromise and that is the condition upon which blessing is predicated

5. John is told not to seal the book, for it was immediately needed; its main thrust was the conflict with imperial Rome, not some imaginary war just prior to the second coming of Christ, at least 1900 years away

6. essentially, two distinct groups with two descriptions each are noted in verse 11 and told to fulfill their destiny

a. the unjust and filthy must follow their character unless they can be converted by grace to the other way

b. the righteous and holy should avoid compromising with their persecutors to save their lives or promote their own physical welfare

c. Christ's swift judgment at the end of this passage has still to do with punishing the persecutors and consoling the persecuted

B. Inside and Outside (Revelation 22:14-17)

1. the seventh and final Revelation beatitude is the most famous; as we sing, "Blessed are they who do his commandments, they shall claim the tree of life."

a. a more correct rendering, however, is probably, "Blessed are they that wash their robes."

b. we are washed from the filth of the world in Christ's blood, where they become white as snow

c. our robes are symbolic representations of an outward manifestation of what resides within us; in God's eyes, we wear our character and motivations and faith so that that they can be seen

d. the martyrs of the first century washed their robes in Christ's blood by sharing his fate and

others join their ranks by dying to sin and living to Christ

2. Peter is never portrayed in scripture as manning the pearly gates of Heaven, but those gates simply swing open to the righteous and holy whom God judges worthy to eat from the tree of eternal life
 - a. left outside of God's eternal presence and comfort, however, are the dogs (see harlots and homosexuals), sorcerers, sexually immoral, murderers, idolaters and those who love and practice lies
 - a. of this latter group, Revelation 21:8 had reserved a place in the lake of fire and so the "outside" here is synonymous with Hell
 - c. notice that liars has been expanded to include those who simply love and practice lies—those who just walk in religious error and love not the actual truth
3. Jesus stamps the Revelation with his authority as both the Root and Offspring of David, a reference to his eternity as the Messiah who both created David's bloodline and shared in it as a fleshly descendant on his physical side
 - a. he is also the bright and morning star, the fulfillment of Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:10 that "A star shall come out of Jacob; a scepter shall rise out of Israel"
 - b. the bright and morning star announces the promise of a new day, both in Asia Minor and eternity
4. the Holy Spirit and the church he leads agree and say, "Come" to console the suffering saints

C. Grace Be With You (Revelation 22:18-21)

1. this book is to be accepted as scripture, just as much as the four gospels or Second Corinthians or Genesis; it is not to be dismissed or tampered with
2. one who deletes from it, adds to it, or alters any of it is warned that such a sin will be punished, whether the man be a Christian or not
 - a. the plagues described in the trumpets of warning, the bowls of wrath and the lake of fire will be cast upon such a one and his name will be erased from the Book of Life, making his entrance into Heaven impossible
 - b. the same kind of warning is attached to all of Scripture in Galatians 1:6-9, but here it has specifically to do with this book
3. finally, his promised coming is not his second coming to Earth, but another in a long series of figurative comings wherein he judged some nation and protected his remnant people from them
 - a. there is just no way that his second coming could have been predicted as coming shortly or quickly when at least 1900 years would first elapse
 - b. John answers with his hopes and agreement and begs Jesus to come as predicted, and he did

II. Some Applications

A. Obedience

1. the creeds teach us that salvation is by faith alone, apart from any responsibility or activity of the candidate for salvation
 - a. yet the scriptural evidence weighs considerably in a different direction
 - b. salvation cannot be earned by man's works alone, but his response to the commands of God in accordance with the offer of grace will form the testimony that either convicts or justifies him before God's judgment seat
2. the beatitudes say, "Blessed is he who keeps the word and who does his commandments"
 - a. this was the point of the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matthew 7:21-27)
 - b. it was a constant warning in Paul's own preaching (Philippians 2:12-13)
 - c. it is possible for a man to believe in Jesus, but refuse to become his disciple and in such a state, he cannot be saved (John 12:42-43)

B. Worship

1. John's error in worshiping the angels was quickly corrected by them for they knew that God dealt severely with mortal creatures who accepted undue adoration; Herod had been killed for not correcting audience that flattered him by suggesting his was the voice of a god and not a man (see Acts 12)
2. Paul had warned that the worship of angels was a false religion that drew one away from true faith (Colossians 2:16-23)
3. Peter had his own brush with undue adoration (Acts 10:24-26)
 - a. today, angels, dead people and religious leaders are all afforded undue adoration in the form

of prayers to them and praise shown them

b. dead Catholic saints are approached for help in their areas of expertise and the Pope has his toe and ring kissed by all who come near him

c. Peter would have argued with such a thing but the Pope demands it

4. we must be careful to worship only the creator and never the creature

C. Amending God's Will

1. Mormonism has most famously added to God's scripture, violating Galatians 1:6-9

2. the Revelation is also attacked when the definitions of righteous and unrighteous are altered to fit more people on the highway to heaven

a. back in Revelation 21:8, we find that the unbelieving will be condemned, but modern man makes room in Heaven for Muslims, Jews and some mythical group of people in the middle of Africa who supposedly have no contact ever with the Bible

b. the sexually immoral are there as well, but this generation has defined sexual immorality so narrowly that almost nobody fits

c. the same passage condemns "all liars," but we turn down the heat on those who confine themselves to fibs and little white lies

d. in Revelation 22:15, dogs does not refer to literal canines, but to practicing homosexuals and yet denominations are falling over themselves to get them into heaven

e. supposedly, the church of one's choice and even the religion of one's choice is sufficient with God in our ecumenical culture, but in the same verse, God condemns all those who practice lies and not every church or religion can be right if there is only one faith (see Ephesians 4:5) and one God (see Ephesians 4:6)

3. we must be content to speak as the oracles of God (see First Peter 4:11) and not be found by God to have tampered with his will, condoning what he condemns or condemning what he condones

Conclusion

Come, Lord Jesus!

Revelation (30): Review

a gospel sermon by Jeff S. Smith

Introduction

Our long journey through the Revelation has concluded and we have discovered the answer to our early brethren's pleadings regarding their persecution at the hands of the Roman emperor, Domitian, and his forces. Satan was working through him, as he has worked through Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar and countless others, both great and small. The Revelation concluded with a promise that this persecution would eventually end and that the faithful would be rewarded for their perseverance. As we review this evening, we tie together the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

Discussion

I. Background

A. A Time Of Intense Persecution

1. sadly, every generation since the resurrection of Christ has believed it was surely the last
 - a. because evil men tend to wax worse and worse, it always seems to the current generation of saints as if God must be about to act (Second Thessalonians 2:1-12)
 - b. he has acted before, in destroying the world of Noah and then wiping out Sodom and Gomorrah and he has promised to act once more in destroying this Earth and inaugurating eternity both for the righteous and the wicked (Second Peter 3:1-13)
 - c. the fine line we are required to walk is in being constantly prepared for the day of judgment while not becoming so consumed with it that we neglect every other necessity of life
2. yet with all the immorality surrounding us and as much as we may believe that the persecution of Christians has grown so great, there was a much earlier generation who was persecuted far more sorely than ours and the world continued anyway
 - a. Christians of the first and second centuries were persecuted first by the Jews and then by the Romans, who held the power of law over the world and could execute anyone who refused to worship Caesar
 - b. the saints may very well have expected the gospel age was expiring, but in fact, the faith would rise even higher in a few generations and so God's patience would bear fruit
3. if a termination of the Earth was not the solution the early saints sought, then what was?
 - a. the apostles had forewarned every convert of this threat (Second Timothy 3:10-13)
 - b. they had borne the force of persecution themselves, from governments, countrymen and even brethren
 - c. some, like Stephen and James, were martyred for their faith, thus planting the notion in every saint's mind that he or she could be next (Acts 9:1-2, 12:1-4)
 - d. the book of Hebrews was written primarily to convince Jewish Christians not to revert to Judaism just to ward off persecution from unbelieving family and friends (Hebrews 10:32-39)
 - e. and, lastly, John was disturbed on the island of Patmos to receive a consoling Revelation from Jesus that would promise comfort in the short term and victory in the long

B. God's Answer

1. some time later, letters began arriving in churches across Asia Minor, to report what John saw in their collective futures
2. the letter was filled with apocalyptic messages, numerical symbolism and recycled imagery from the Old Testament
3. it also contains its own timetable for answering the questions of those early Christians
 - a. the opening of the message informs you that these things will come to pass shortly (Revelation 1:1-3)
 - b. if the message had told of events 2000 years from now, it would have only discouraged you more, but the turn of events is promised to happen shortly and so it is a consolation to you
 - c. he had even told the Roman brethren that he would bruise Satan's power shortly in using false doctrine if they would adhere to the truth (Romans 16:17-20)

C. Chronological Context

1. in our study, we began with an authorship date of about A.D. 96 and the expectation that John

was recording predictions of things that were *then* shortly to come to pass

2. verse one says that the things we are about to read of “must shortly come to pass”
 - a. *must* is an impersonal verb that indicates a moral necessity is involved; the nature of the case is such that the things revealed here must take place as and when prophesied
 - b. God, the eternally vigilant protector of widows and orphans, is making a statement that he will soon strike in defense of his faith, and he adds a guarantee that all here prophesied will be fulfilled just thus
 1. for God to offer these Christians false hope of swift relief would violate his honor and record; he would be the God of good intentions rather than remarkable results
 2. therefore, it was a moral imperative that God act then to relieve his disciples from the tyranny of Domitian
 3. did God act or did he fail, allowing them to be swallowed up whole?
 - a. is this prophecy delayed at least 1900 years while they rot in their graves?
 - b. can we count on God to say what he means, mean what he says, and make it happen when a moral imperative is involved?
 - c. I believe so for I am faithful in the God of the Bible who does not fail (Hebrews 13:5-6)
 - d. therefore, the prophecy related by John must have been carried out “shortly” from when that term was attached to it

II. Brief Review Outline of Revelation

- A. Introduction (see Revelation 1:1-20)
 1. in the opening chapter, we learn the who and why of Revelation
 2. John writes in the spirit from the island of Patmos to the suffering saints under Rome’s sword in Asia Minor about relief that was to begin coming soon
 3. a vision of the triumphant Christ reminds them that he is still in power and will act
- B. Messages to The Seven Churches (see Revelation 2:1-3:22)
 1. seven letters follow which are directed to seven churches in particular, warning most of them of chinks in the armor and promising all of them eternal reward if they overcome the tempter
 2. these seven letters are always practical in dealing with conditions of congregations in any age
- C. God’s Throne (see Revelation 4:1-5:14)
 1. an emotional scene before God’s throne shows the worship and praise that continue there where pain is unknown
 2. a sealed scroll is discovered and Christ, the lamb of God, steps forward to open it
- D. Seven Seals (see Revelation 6:1-8:5)
 1. the seven seals are broken and reveal a record of the progress of the gospel into its current stage of persecution
 2. the guilty are punished in measure
 3. the 144,000 represent God’s church militant on Earth and in the path of his judgment upon Rome; they are sealed for their protection
 4. the great multitude represents his church triumphant beyond this Earth; they worship and praise him
- E. Seven Trumpets (see Revelation 8:6-11:19)
 1. the trumpets repeat the progress of the gospel and punishments in different images
 2. the little scroll is eaten by John to represent the sweetness of God’s will to his people, but the bitterness that results when immoral men reject it and trouble the saints over it
 3. the two witnesses represent the resurrection of the cause of Christ from the apparent doom inflicted upon it by persecution, that the gospel is only strengthened by trial
- F. Victory (see Revelation 12:1-18:24)
 1. various images and events are used in this passage to depict the church’s struggle with imperialism
 2. seven bowls of wrath are poured out on the world to show God’s impending judgment upon Roman persecution in those early centuries of the church

3. finally, Rome's power to persecute is concluded

G. New Heavens and Earth (see Revelation 19:1-22:21)

1. beyond the hope of comfort through persecution, the Revelation ends with a renewal of God's vow to reward his redeemed with an eternal mansion in his presence
2. the New Jerusalem within new heavens and Earth form a brilliant symbol of man's heavenly hope
3. yet he is warned that he can be left outside with unbelievers if he falls away

Conclusion

The Revelation is over and God has proved his power in Asia Minor. The only thing that remains is for us to be faithful and wait for the ultimate reward that those saints also sought.