

Daniel and Revelation

A Comparative Study

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Approaching the Study of Scripture

I have been asked to comment on two prophetic books of Scripture: first the book of Daniel, and then the book of the Revelation. What I want to do, therefore, is to suggest certain approaches to the study of these two books. The first will be my own approach, and I am not saying that everybody has to adopt it. Under God we are all free to make our individual approaches to his word, and to listen to the Lord speaking to us in the way that he adapts himself to our individual personalities.

That said, there is a common area in the study of the word of God. We all have to come to agree what the actual words mean. If the Bible says 'cat', it isn't saying 'dormouse', and we all have to agree. If you find me expounding a passage that says 'cat' as though it were talking about a dog, you'll say I've got it wrong, whatever my personality and preferences are. So we have to agree as to what the text is saying. That's the beginning of a long task, because the Bible is written in books that use many thousands of words, and our job is to see how they all fit together.

As with any other doctrine in God's great revelation, there are two ways of approaching prophecy. The one is the way of *systematic theology*. That is an excellent and entirely valid way of approaching God's revelation and nothing I say is meant to cast any aspersion whatsoever on it.

What is systematic theology?

If you are studying *prophecy*, for instance, you go through Scripture, and you read it. You select all those places where the Bible deals with prophecy and endeavour to understand how they fit together. Out of those many verses and paragraphs you make a system of theology that all hangs together.

Now that is a very valid way. It proceeds on the assumption that, whatever God says about prophecy throughout the whole of his word, if you select these prophetic elements and put them all together they will make sense. They will not contradict each other but fit together into a logically coherent system, and that is what systematic theologians aim to do in their study of the prophetic elements in the Bible.

They write it down for us, and if you open a book of systematic theology you will find one chapter or one whole section of the book on *the doctrine of God*, for instance. Everything that's said about God in holy Scripture has been taken out, selected and put together, and made into a coherent system in that particular chapter or section of the book. Then you will find another chapter, headed perhaps, *Soteriology*, meaning the study and science of salvation. Everything that is said about that subject in the Bible is selected, put together and considered, and made

into a logically coherent system, so that you'll read all about salvation in this one chapter on soteriology.

When it comes to prophecy, the book will have a chapter on what's generally called *eschatology* or something like that. You'll find there all the parts where the Bible has talked about prophecy put together in one nice, good, neat chapter or section.

Preachers in particular like it because it helps them make very good sermons. It is very lucid, very clear, with points 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 7a and 8, etc., and that's very good. It is a remarkably easy way in the end to take it all in, because you can copy down what the preacher says. We all do it, of course. Whether consciously or subconsciously, we all tend to take subjects out of the Bible and put the details together in one coherent whole. That is admirable, and the presupposition upon which it is built is absolutely true. Systematic theologians rightly assume that, when you select all the things about any one subject and put them together, they cohere. They make logical sense and don't contradict each other because they are taken from the word of God, which was inspired by the living God, so they make a consistent whole.

But I'm sure you will have noticed that the Bible is not written as systematic theology. First comes a story, perhaps, and then a genealogy, and now there are five verses of prophecy. Then, instead of concentrating on the matter in hand, it goes off and gives you an exhortation. So it's all sort of mixed up. We've got to be careful what we say about it. We'd better not say that the Bible is a very bad preacher that doesn't know how to get the stuff across. To put no finer a point on it, systematic theologies are not necessarily inspired, are they? But the Bible is; and God, who inspired the Bible to be written in the way it's written, presumably knows the best way to communicate his truth. If systematic theology had been the very best way, wouldn't God have used it? God has chosen to communicate himself, not in the form of systematic theology, but in the form that you see before you in the books of holy writ. You can't take any one book and say, 'this is the book on prophecy.' Prophecy will be found in all sorts of books in the Bible.

The contents of the book of Daniel

That is eminently true of the two books that we're going to study together, and in particular of the prophecy of Daniel. There are some very famous prophecies in the book of Daniel and I'm going to presume that you all know them very well. So much so that, if you were woken up in the middle of the night, and somebody said, 'tell me what the contents of Daniel are,' you would proceed from chapter 1 and recite all the contents of the book.

Prophecies

Chapter 2 is a remarkable prophecy in the form of the dream image given to Nebuchadnezzar one night as he was lying in his bed in a very troubled sleep. He saw a magnificent image, its head of gold and so on, with descending metals until it got right to the toes. As it stood there in all its magnificence, a stone, a boulder, was cut out without hands from a nearby mountain. It came whizzing through the air, hit the image on its feet, smashed it to smithereens, and itself grew into a great mountain. We know this is a prophecy because Daniel expounded it

in the form of a prediction of the things that would happen from Nebuchadnezzar's time onward until the setting up of the Messianic kingdom of Christ. So chapter 2 is a prophecy.

Chapter 7 is a big prophecy. Daniel sees four wild beasts arising, and we are told that they represent four world empires that will come in succession, and what will happen to them: they will eventually be destroyed and the kingdom of the earth given to the Son of Man and to the saints. It is a remarkable prophecy.

Chapter 8 is also a prophecy, conveyed under the figure of two wild beasts.

Chapter 9, at its end, is a prophecy. It is a long chapter where Daniel enquires about the restoration of Jerusalem, promised through Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah had said that Israel should be in exile and Jerusalem in ruins for seventy years, and then Jerusalem would be restored. When the time drew near, Daniel prayed to God about this matter. When and exactly how was God going to fulfil the promise and restore Jerusalem? The major part of the chapter is taken up with Daniel's prayer and intercession to God, but in the end he is given a prophecy concerning the timing of the restoration of Jerusalem. So it's a prophecy too.

Chapters 10–12 are a very detailed prophecy of what should happen in the intervening centuries.

So Daniel is famous because of these great prophecies, but it would only take a child to see that not all the book of Daniel is prophecy. Much of it is straightforward narrative.

Narratives

Chapter 1, for instance, is the famous story of how Daniel and his three colleagues were admitted to the imperial university in Babylon. Coming to dinner as students on the first night, they were faced with the question as to whether they would eat the food in the university dining rooms, which had been provided ultimately by His Majesty. Would they eat this food, defiled as it was by being offered to idols, or would they not? They chose not to, and made their stand for their faith in God. It's not a prophecy; it's a story.

Chapter 3 is not a prophecy. It's the story of how Nebuchadnezzar built an image of gold, set it up in the plain of Dura, and commanded that when the orchestra played everyone should bow down and worship this image that Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Three of Daniel's companions were there. They refused to bow down and were thrown into the fiery furnace. There appeared one 'like a son of the gods' (v. 25), and the fire didn't harm them. This became a colossal witness to Nebuchadnezzar, and brought him to his first dim appreciation that the God of the Hebrews was the true and living God. The three men were brought out of the furnace and set free. As it stands, it's not a prophecy; it is a narrative.

Chapter 4 is a narrative in which Nebuchadnezzar is likened to a large beautiful tree that was cut down and its stump left in the ground. The tree was later allowed to sprout again and grow back to its original majesty. It was a parable to Nebuchadnezzar of the discipline that God was about to bring upon him because of his arrogance and pride. It is not so much a prophecy as it is a story of Nebuchadnezzar's own personal experience of his discipline and restoration by God.

Chapter 5 is another story, which isn't a prophecy either. It's the story of Belshazzar, much preached upon and I shall not need to remind you of it. At the height of his fury, Belshazzar called for the golden vessels that had been taken out of the house of the Lord, and he drank

from them before his courtiers. Then there came the famous hand that wrote on the wall, indicating that Belshazzar's life and reign were finished, and that night he lay a corpse upon the ground. That isn't a prophecy; it's the story of Belshazzar.

Chapter 6 isn't a prophecy either. It is the story of how Darius was flattered by his courtiers and civil servants. They suggested to him that, for the unification of the empire and the general peace, it might be a nice idea to unify religion. The people were praying to one thousand and one gods, each thinking his god was better than the others. With all the social unrest that that makes, and sometimes riots, wouldn't it be a nice idea if they unified religion and got the whole empire praying to one god, at least for a month or two?

They came up with a brilliant suggestion that the god in question should be Darius himself. When they put it to him in good, diplomatic, civil service language, he thought it was a novel idea. His majesty would not really be doing something arrogant, but if all the gods were going to be represented in one, who would be better than Darius? He saw the point, and said, 'Well, yes, go ahead.' Anybody who refused to bow down and worship Darius—or, conversely, was so perverse as to worship some other god instead of Darius—would have to be dealt with. Daniel was such, and he was thrown into the den of lions. That's not a prophecy either, is it?

All systematic theologians are careful, or intend to be. But if you weren't careful, you would be tempted just to take out the chapters on prophecy, and add them to all the other prophetic bits in Scripture, and so make your system. That method, good as it is, has a weakness, because it sometimes doesn't listen to God saying the thing as God says it. It doesn't necessarily always take the context of the prophecies seriously.

So in these studies I propose to make a little contribution to your study of these books by looking not simply at the prophetic bits, but at the way they are written, to see first of all what the whole book is saying. That won't do away with the need to be systematic theologians. Its value is that it will put the prophetic things in their context, and when we begin to see them in their context that will help to control the message, even of the prophetic parts. We shall see how the prophetic parts and the other parts combine together to get across the totality of what God is saying in that particular context.

An analogy

Suppose somebody asked us to describe a human hand. We could say that the human hand is more or less square, and it's made up of flesh and bones and blood and things. This square bit of stuff has got four bits sticking out at the top and one at the side. What would you think of me if I said, 'You don't need to consider it in its totality. Take off that third one in the row, put it with another collection of third fingers, and then you'd be able to do a study of third fingers.' But how on earth would you know what third fingers were for? You might have a marvellous study of fingers, but if you didn't study them in relation to the whole hand, what would you come up with? Well, a systematic theology of fingers! That would be useful for studying fingers; they do all have things in common. Most of these fingers on my hand, except that funny one that sticks out at the side, have got three bits to them that generally fold in the same way, and so a comparative study of fingers is useful.

But even when you've done that, unless you study those fingers in connection with the whole thing, you would be in danger of missing the real point, because to describe a hand as a bit of square stuff with four things sticking out the top, and one at the side, misses what the great purpose of the hand is—its *function*. Why has it got a square bit in the middle with a sort of hollow in the centre, and what's this thing doing sticking out the side? How does that contribute to the whole?

'Well,' you say, 'it's absolutely essential for it to be sticking out the side; and the right side of this one, not the left side.'

'Why?'

'Because you can see how it functions by its position, and what it contributes to the whole when grasping something.'

'And why is that little one shorter than all the others?'

'It has a marvellous function, and it's perhaps the strongest of all the fingers to grip things with. If you let a little baby get hold of your finger with its little finger, you'll see how tough his little finger is.'

Yes, it's when you study the elements as a whole that you see their function, and why they're there. It couldn't be any other way if you're going to have a sensible hand, for that's the way it's got to be. Knowing what a thing is in its totality, how it functions, and why each bit has got to be there, is to come to an understanding of it.

If we were to apply that analogy to the book of Daniel, it's not a sin to leave the rest, add those prophetic chapters to all the other prophetic chapters in the Bible, and make a system out of them. But the first thing to do, perhaps, is to study the prophetic bits along with all the other bits, and ask how all those chapters in Daniel fit together. Be they narrative or prophecy, how do they function and why has God put them together? Who knows, we might be driven to the conclusion that they're just bits and pieces, valuable in themselves, but it wouldn't matter what order they were in. They could be in any old order; the chapters are just a convenient box to put these things into.

But perhaps we oughtn't to start with that presupposition. If God put them together, he meant to; and he put them in the right order with each chapter contributing to the meaning of the whole.

So that's what we shall be trying to do this week.

Why take the prophecy of Daniel and the book of the Revelation?

Comparing them raises some interesting questions.

Daniel 7

This is about a very famous vision. Let me quote some of the elements.

As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands

served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgement, and the books were opened. (vv. 9–10)

It's a vision of the throne of God and other thrones; then a description is given of the occupant, God himself, the Ancient of Days: 'the hair of his head like pure wool'. A description of the throne is given—'a stream of fire issued and came out from before him'; 'and the books were opened.' Then one of the four beasts is immediately destroyed (v. 11). The lives of the other three are prolonged a little while and then they are dismissed.

In the vision Daniel sees one like the Son of Man, who comes to the Ancient of Days, is given worldwide dominion, and the kingdom is given to him and to the saints of the Most High.

That is all in one chapter in Daniel, one vision.

The book of Revelation

John will tell us of the visions that were given to him. He wasn't just rehashing what Daniel had been told—at least, that is my conviction. It wasn't that John had read Daniel, and then thought, 'Well, I know what I'll do; I'll pretend to have a vision as well, and put together ideas I got from Daniel with some of my own.'

No, John was given his own visions that strikingly resembled the visions given to Daniel. We shall find the same elements that are in Daniel 7 in the book of Revelation. The interesting thing is that we shall not find them in one chapter like Daniel has them, we shall find them scattered through different parts of the Revelation.

Chapter 4 is the throne of God, and its occupant is described in verse 3. It is described in much greater detail here than the throne in Daniel 7, and we shall subsequently find how highly important that is. It is described not just as an impressionist artist might describe a throne; it's described in precise geometrical detail in order to convey to us, not so much its size and design but the quality of the government of the one who sits on it. What kind of a government is it? What kind of a throne is it? How does he rule, how does he reign, and so forth?

Chapters 4–5 continue with the same scene until we see the Lion/Lamb come to him who sits on the throne and take the scroll that is written within and on the back, and sealed with seven seals. So, Revelation 4 and 5 have similar things to Daniel 7, but the description of the one who comes and takes the book is different.

There are no beasts of the bad sort in Revelation 4–5. The Authorised Version uses the term 'beasts', but they are living creatures, not wild beasts like these roaring, destructive wild beasts of Daniel 7. John has his equivalent, starting in chapter 13, but these two beasts are not destroyed as they are in Daniel 7. One of the beasts occurs again in chapter 17, described in great detail, with his heads and his horns, and there's a woman sitting on this beast (v. 3). There is a brief mention made that the Lamb and those that are with him destroy the beast, but it's only a tiny part of that chapter (v. 14). The beast and the false prophet are finally destroyed in chapter 19 (v. 20).

So, the similarities with Daniel that John has in his book are not in one chapter of the Revelation, they are scattered throughout the book. If we were systematic theologians, we

could say, 'All right, John, we see what you've done, but would it not be more sensible to take all those, compress them into one chapter, and call it *the doctrine of the beast*? It would be easier to follow.' But our question ought to be the other way round. 'John, why haven't you compressed them into one chapter, and why are they distributed in various contexts through the Revelation?'

We should aim to study God's word *as God has written it*, trying to understand each element within its own context to see how each part in each book functions, how it contributes to the whole, and how all the different parts combining together control each other. That is how we shall come to the message that God himself has designed to convey in the book, as a book.

When we have got that, then we can begin our serious work and say how the messages in each of the sixty-six books of the Bible can all be put together and combine in the different orders of systematic theology and the doctrine of Scripture.

My task this week is a very humble one, therefore. Please don't expect me to do more than I'm promising to do. I'm not going to offer you an alternative systematic eschatology. There are all sorts of schemes and theories on the Christian market. You surely have your own, and you ought to be convinced that yours is right. At the end of the week I'm going to leave you with your system as I found it. Whatever your system is, our first task should be to study the Bible as it stands, and take prophecy in its context in each book. Only when we've understood it in each book do we then build our systematic theologies.

When we have built our system of prophecy, then our third important task is to come back to the Bible and test our system by the Bible, because, you see, the Bible is God's way of communicating his truth. In our attempt to understand, we ought to start with God's way. Yes, build our systems; but because God knows how to communicate his truth, ultimately the best way is to communicate it in the way that God has communicated it. That is, in the way it stands in his word.

We always ought to check our systems, because the danger is that, when they get entrenched into our heads, we could sometimes be inclined to interpret Scripture in order to fit our system. It could happen that our system is controlling our interpretation of Scripture, and where Scripture doesn't quite fit in we say 'that's too bad, we'll neglect that bit.' Or we chop off its feet, cut off its head, or what not, because it doesn't fit our Procrustean bed.¹ We should be bringing our system back to Scripture, and where our system doesn't actually fit Scripture, or Scripture doesn't fit it, then we ought to be changing our system.

The technical terms I shall be using

Let's start, then, with the prophecy of Daniel, on the absolutely ground floor. We're going to make, in our minds, a table of contents, and I want to introduce to you now three words. They are sort of technical terms and I use them in a very arbitrary fashion. You don't have to use

¹ After Procrustes, the bandit from Greek mythology who stretched or amputated the limbs of travellers to make them conform to the length of his bed.

them yourselves, but, because these are processes that I shall take you through, you need to know what I mean.

Thought-flow, structure and pattern

In the study of Scripture itself, I would attach the number one element to *thought-flow*. Two would be *structure*, and three would be *pattern*. Thought-flow, structure and pattern, and the greatest of these is thought-flow! When we come to Scripture, and particularly narrative books—but it applies also to the logic of the Epistles—what we are doing first and last is tracing the thought-flow of the passage. What God is saying from this sentence to that sentence, from this verse to that verse; where this particular thought starts, how it proceeds through the middle, and where it comes to its end. As we do that, we shall find ourselves saying, ‘Ah, wait a minute, have we finished that story, or does it carry on somewhere else?’

An illustration

You know how it is when your friend comes back from her holiday. ‘It was a beautiful holiday,’ she says. ‘I’d like to tell you all about it; how we spent every day on the beach and the sea was marvellous. Oh! Do you know what? On the first day I realized that I’d forgotten my bathing costume, so I had to go up to the street. When I got to the shops there was a big accident, I had to go to hospital, and that was terrible.’

Then you say, ‘Wait a minute, my dear, is this part of the same story? I thought you were going to tell me about how you went swimming and saw the coral, and the porpoises and the whales and things. Now you seem to be describing being in a hospital ward. What has this got to do with it? Is it the same story, or another one?’

How would you decide where one story ends and the next one begins? Well, simply by trying to follow the thought-flow, and asking, ‘Where does this begin, what is it about, and how does it proceed? How do we get from here to there, to there, to there, and where does it come to its finale?’

If you attempt to write a table of contents, before long you’ll find yourself having to decide about the thought-flow. The translators of the magnificent King James Version divided it up into chapters, but in sermons you’ll hear even humble expositors say, ‘Sorry, the chapter division is wrong here. They’ve chopped off the last verse of the previous chapter and put it at the beginning of the next, but they oughtn’t to have done that. That verse belongs to the previous chapter.’ What they’re commenting on is the thought-flow.

So, even to make a simple table of contents, you have got to ask about the thought-flow. It’s moderately easy to make a thought-flow of the book of Daniel. Let me attempt one and see whether you will agree with me. You’ll need to keep your eyes on the text.

The thought-flow in Daniel

Chapter 1

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. . . . And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Dan 1:1-5, 21)

Vessels and food

The first story begins with Nebuchadnezzar bringing the vessels from the house of God in Jerusalem and putting them into the treasury of his god.

Then we have Daniel and his friends being assigned the food that the king ate and the wine he drank. Well, the boys refused to eat it, and that could have got the steward into trouble. They came to an agreement with him, and he gave them porridge instead of the meat. At the end of a course on that diet, they were fitter and healthier than all the others. And what is more, when it came to their final examinations, they all got first class degrees, and everybody was pleased. 'And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus' (v. 21). With that little chronological remark, he's signing off story number one.

This happened when Daniel and his friends were students, and they made their stand. Thank God for that, for it proved to be a backbone for them for the rest of their lives. It's a thing to be remembered, isn't it? At school, at university, or getting called up into the army, you'll want to take your stand at once. It could cost you a lot, but you'll never forget it for the rest of your life. As Daniel rose to eminence in the high echelons of the civil service in Babylon, a lot of the backbone had been built into him when he first dared to take his stand over such a humble matter as daily food.

So, the first story concerns vessels taken from the house of God, and food.

Chapter 2

Nebuchadnezzar's dream

This is the story of Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the image. In the morning he demanded that his servants should tell him what the dream was. He was checking them out, you know, whether they did have supernatural knowledge or not. They would tell him what the dream was, and then give the interpretation. The rest of the wise men said it couldn't be done, and Daniel did it.

I suspect it's easy enough to see that it comes to its climax when Nebuchadnezzar is vastly impressed of the truth, 'your God is God of gods' (2:47). The king honoured Daniel, and Daniel

used his influence to get jobs for his companions. A successful ending to that one, complete, story

Chapter 3

Nebuchadnezzar's golden image

This is another self-contained story; beautifully and dramatically written, of course. The build up to it, the magnificence of the image, all the satraps and high officials there, the orchestra in place, and then the tremendous suspense: will the young men bow down or won't they? They refuse to bow down and are brought before the king. Will they yield? Will they give in under pressure? No! They defy his majesty and he commands the furnace to be heated seven times hotter, and they're thrown in. Marvellous stuff, isn't it? And then they saw a fourth man walking in the fire, one like a son of the gods. They weren't saved from the fire; they were saved in it, whereby hangs a long tale. Nebuchadnezzar saw it and was mightily moved, and commanded them to come out. Then once more we come to a climax: 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego . . . for there is no other god who is able to rescue in this way' (vv. 28–29). That's the thought-flow of one complete story.

Chapter 4

Nebuchadnezzar's downfall and restoration

The king is cut down like a tree and then restored. Likewise, it is easy to see this as one whole story from its beginning to its eventual climax: 'Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble' (v. 37).

You can't help noticing a similarity in the endings of these stories. In each of them, the monarch expresses the positive effect of these things upon him, and comes to recognize the reality and the truth of the God of Israel. They have something in common, even as narratives.

Chapter 5

Belshazzar's feast and death

This is about a king, and he's cut down, *full stop*. When the king in chapter 4 was warned by God, he initially refused the warning and was cut down, but later he repented. However, this fellow, with the example of Nebuchadnezzar in front of him and knowing the story (see v. 22), deliberately rejected it. When he was cut down, there was no restoration. Belshazzar was killed that very night, and Darius claimed his throne.

We can see that the two stories in chapters 4 and 5 are separate stories, and yet they're connected. In chapter 5 Daniel reminds Belshazzar about what he knew of the experience of Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 4.

Chapter 6

Daniel and the lions' den

In this chapter things have changed. Daniel and his friends are no longer under the Babylonians, they are under the Medo-Persians. The king is no longer a Babylonian, it's Darius the Mede. That's a significant shift, if we're taking notice of the chronology.

Under Darius, Daniel persists in prayer to God. Even when the command was that he should abstain from praying to any god other than Darius, Daniel refuses the king's edict and persists in praying to the true God of heaven. It's a story in itself of how he was promoted to great honour. He prospered in the reign of Darius, and into the reign of Cyrus the Persian.

Chapter 7

The four beasts

This is the vision of the four beasts and the Son of Man, and it obviously stands by itself.

Chapter 8

The two beasts

This is a separate, self-contained vision about two beasts.

Chapter 9

Jeremiah's prophecy about Jerusalem

Likewise self-contained, this is the story of Daniel's great prayer about Jerusalem: how it had been cut down, and when it would be rebuilt.

Chapters 10–12

The man above the river

I suggest to you that these final chapters in the book are all one. Not three chapters, but three parts of one whole. Why do I say that? Well, because the vision is dated to the third year of Cyrus, king of Persia.

The prophecies in chapter 11 and on into chapter 12 were communicated to Daniel by this man above the river through the various angelic servants that were around him. In chapter 12 it's still the same vision. See verse 6: 'And someone said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, "How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?"'

Thought-flow demands that those last three chapters should be taken as one and the same vision.

Functional Relationships

By the end of our last session we had made ourselves a table of contents of the book of Daniel, and we noticed that, if we follow thought-flow, there are ten units in the book, not twelve.

Let us now look for a while at that table of contents.² Our first and fundamental principle is to trace the thought-flow, and our second is to ask what goes with what? Do these ten individual units have anything to do with each other? If they turn out not to, we have no grounds for complaint. If God chooses to tell us about ten units, even if they're completely unrelated, each unit will tell us something that we need to know.

It could turn out, then, that the book of Daniel is somewhat like the book of Proverbs. The whole genius of a proverb is that it states a truth succinctly, completely, by itself. Therefore, if there's no connection with anything that goes before it or comes after it, again we have no grounds for complaint. By definition, a proverb is a very short pithy statement, conveying a truth, and that's that.

It is in the nature of proverbs that sometimes they don't tell all the truth, but one side of it. 'Answer not a fool according to his folly' says Proverbs 26:4; 'Answer a fool according to his folly,' says verse 5. Both are true within the limits that were intended. So then, if Daniel turned out to be a book like the book of Proverbs, we have no basic reason for objecting or complaining.

Our question is, however, is it so? Are these ten separate units nothing much to do with each other; or are they functionally related, like the fingers of the hand? So let's make a few more observations about what we read in the text of the book itself, and you will notice where the book of Daniel begins, and what it talks about.

Chapter 1 and chapter 5

The vessels that Nebuchadnezzar brought from Jerusalem

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. (1:1)

Did he really? And what happened then?

² As Dr Gooding was speaking, he was writing on a board. The Table in this transcript is from another series. Please see further notes on Daniel and Revelation in 'Study Notes' on our website.

And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. (v. 2)

He brought these vessels, which were made of gold, from the house of the Lord at Jerusalem where they were dedicated to the service of the one true God, and put them in the house of his god. It would have been with the kind of reverence he knew how to give them. He was an old Pagan, of course. He didn't understand how wrong idolatry was, but he showed reverence to the God of Israel, as he would have shown to all the other gods. He may well have thought that Marduk was the chief of all gods, and Nebuchadnezzar paid Marduk handsomely for being interested in him; but while Marduk may have been the chief god, the God of the Jews was a god to be respected. So when Nebuchadnezzar brought these vessels to Babylon he put them into the temple of his god. Is this statement just setting the context, to get people interested? Is that what this bit is—a little background? Was it meant to be taken seriously, or has it nothing to do with what follows?

Is it what the Latin orators would have called a *captatio benevolentiae*? It gets people's interest. For instance, on my way here to preach tonight, I saw a cow going across the main street of Toronto, and all the traffic was held up. Wasn't that interesting? Well, it's got the children listening!

Are these vessels of gold saying something profound that needs to be understood? God allowed a pagan emperor to take these holy vessels from his temple and put them in the house of his god—in Babylon, of all places. So we tuck it under our caps and go on reading. Should we read of them anywhere else, of course, the memory will recur again. Do you know where we read of them again? You do, don't you? I ask you because I'm afraid you'll think I'm making it up! I'm not, am I? I'm not going to write 'vessels' in where they were never written in by Daniel.

Belshazzar's feast

In chapter 5 the critical thing in the story is the vessels of gold. It was not simply when the banquet started; it was at that crucial moment when Belshazzar came to decide a question that had been niggling in his heart and conscience for months, perhaps years. Now he came to his decision at last.

He had been told about Nebuchadnezzar and his conversion; how he'd been a licentious, proud, arrogant monarch, and then he had a mental breakdown or whatever it was. He had lived like an animal and then he had an experience of the living God that returned his sanity. He had heard it many times from the Queen Mother until he was sick of hearing it.

He was going to decide what life was about, so he put on this tremendous party for all the lords and ladies. Right in the middle of it, he made his statement, 'What is life for?' He ordered that these very same vessels were to be brought out of the temple and set before him. In front of all his nobles and ladies, the king raised these golden vessels and drank from them himself.

Immediately the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace, opposite the lampstand. And the king saw the hand as it wrote. Then the king's

colour changed, and his thoughts alarmed him; his limbs gave way, and his knees knocked together. (Dan 5:5–6)

Dramatic stuff, isn't it? But do you see how that brings a lot of things together? When we see it at the crucial moment of this story, we shall perceive that it isn't just a *captatio benevolentiae*—just a story to make the kids listen before you begin the sermon proper. If we hadn't been told here what these vessels were, we shouldn't have known what they stood for. And if we hadn't observed Nebuchadnezzar's behaviour in chapter 1, we shouldn't be able to contrast it with this.

Notice the contrast, won't you? These are the same vessels, but Nebuchadnezzar's treatment of them was reverent. He didn't put them on his own dinner table. We are explicitly told that he put them into the house of his gods, paying them reverence, such as a follower of ancient Paganism would. The contrast between Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar is eloquent indeed. This was a God-defying thing, and it forms, of course, a very big climax.

Let's think about thought-flow again

God gave Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, complete victory over Jerusalem. All these stories up to chapter 5 happened under the kings of Babylon. But this is the end of Babylon. From chapter 6 onwards it's the time of the Medo-Persians, and the first king is Darius. It doesn't matter that some of the visions may subsequently be dated to the earlier time; the fact in this sequence of thought is that the stories begin with the destruction of Jerusalem by the king of Babylon. God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed and the vessels of God be taken. The misuse of those vessels comes at the crucial point when Babylon is destroyed. There is, then, a thought-flow going between the opening verses of chapter 1 and the last verses of chapter 5.

We observed in our first session that the stories are not altogether separate. When you come to the story of Belshazzar, and Daniel comes in to interpret the dream, he tells Belshazzar, 'You knew all this about the man preceding you in the dynasty, Belshazzar. You knew how he was warned, how he defied God, continued in his sin, how he was cut down, and how he was restored. You knew it, Belshazzar, and, in spite of being warned, you defied the living God. There's no restoration for you, Belshazzar. The writing on the wall says that you're weighed in the balances and found wanting. Tonight your kingdom shall be taken from you and given to the Medo-Persians' (see 5:13–31). That night was Belshazzar slain. And if you were preaching it, you might say they're twin stories.

If Daniel arranged to have that kind of sequence binding those chapters together, it obliges us to ask similar questions of the other chapters. Are they altogether unrelated stories with nothing in common, or are some of them related, at least in their themes?

Chapter 2 and Chapter 3

Stories about images

You might well say, 'In some sense they're twins: both have images.' When you get two or three things that are alike, the wise course is to say, 'Yes, I see they resemble each other, but what are the differences?'

That is true in medicine, and doctors call it *differential diagnosis*. Three men are sitting in a doctor's surgery. When the doctor asks what's wrong, they say they've got sore throats. So they've all got the same thing. But the doctor doesn't say, 'It's aspirin, for you, and you, and you; a guaranteed cure for sore throats.' He asks the first gentleman to open his mouth, he peers down the opening, and says, 'Have you been at the football match recently, shouting your head off? Well, now you've got a sore throat. The cure for you is to go home and shut up for the next ten hours.' The second man is told to open his mouth, and as the doctor peers down the cavern, he says, 'You've got laryngitis and you need some penicillin.' A sore throat, but the difference is important. He tells number three to open his mouth, but he looks grave, and says, 'If you don't mind, I'd like to take a specimen and send it away for examination.' He fears that it's cancer of the throat. All with inflamed throats, but the important thing is the difference—*differential diagnosis*.

It is a thing to be noticed when you find Scripture putting the same things either together or in a series. That's the first step; but the next important step is to notice the differences in these otherwise similar things. Even from a practical point of view, if you are preaching Nebuchadnezzar's dream image, you won't be saying the same thing when you come to the golden image, will you? Why and how are they different?

Chapter 7 and chapter 8

Stories about beasts

Let's look a bit further. What do you say about these two stories? They have in common that they're visions of beasts. At once, of course, the differences strike us. One vision has four beasts, and the other has two. In one story the beasts were destroyed and the kingdom given to the Son of Man; in the other story no mention is made of the Son of Man and his coming kingdom.

Systematic theologians will take these beasts and put them all together. If you were doing a literary criticism of it, you'd notice that they are beasts, but you'd want to know why they are different. Not, are they the same, but, why are they different? And, if you've had four beasts, why do you have to have another two? Or, even if two of these beasts are the same, why are they repeated? What are these beasts saying that those others aren't? The similarities are important, but the differences are even more important. Anyway, those stories strike you as a pair, don't they?

Chapter 9 and chapter 10

The books (ch. 9)

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of the years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. (9:1–2)

That reference to the books isn't just a little interesting background, with nothing much to do with what's to follow—it is key to what follows. Daniel's prayer wasn't based on mere patriotism run wild, or jingoism or anything of the sort. He came to plead before God because of what he'd found written in the prophecies by Jeremiah. Jerusalem would be destroyed and left fallow for seventy years: that was an exceedingly important part of his prophecy.

For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfil to you my promise and bring you back to this place. (Jer 29:10)

The false prophet, Hananiah, had said they'd all be back in two years (see Jer 28:1–3). Events proved that it wasn't going to be two years; it would be seventy years. That is an exceedingly important part of the timetable. But as the seventy years drew towards their end, Daniel set himself to pray *on the basis of the books*. In answer to his prayer, the angel was sent to give him God's interpretation of the books. Yes, Jerusalem would be restored within seventy years, but not fully and finally, for Israel had continued in her sin. The discipline on Israel through the destruction of Jerusalem had not brought the captives and exiles in Babylon to the repentance that was due before God; they continued to break his covenant. Therefore, God would honour the promise of the books and restore Jerusalem, but not completely.

This wouldn't be a restoration such as Isaiah had talked of in golden terms.

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it. (Isa 2:2)

Not yet. In fact, there were times of great trouble ahead. Perhaps you would like to call the interpretation that God gives to the books now, 'a revised interpretation'. There would be further desolations, and it would be seventy times seven before Jerusalem would finally be restored. So this matter of the books and their interpretation is exceedingly important.

The writing of truth (ch. 10)

What do you suppose the last vision in chapters 10–12 is about? The angel brought Daniel a tremendous bit of prophecy, telling him in great detail how the history should develop in the succeeding centuries. Where did he get the information from?

Then he said, 'Do you understand why I came to you? But I shall now return to fight against the prince of Persia; so I am going forth, and behold, the prince of Greece is about to come. However, I will tell you what is inscribed in the writing of truth.' (10:20–21 NASB)

First we had the books, and this is the writing. The angel didn't make it up out of his own head; he was conveying to Daniel what was written in the book of truth. That asks us to think. The books are the inspired prophecies of Jeremiah, which have been given to us in the Old Testament. What is this writing of truth? Was it part of the Bible—biblical exposition? It wasn't when the angel gave it, was it? If Daniel couldn't read the Bible for himself, he was a pretty poor Jew. And if we can't read the Bible for ourselves, we're pretty poor Christians, aren't we?

Daniel could read what was written in the books, and prayed for illumination as to when it would be fulfilled. But he couldn't read what was written in the writing of truth. That wasn't the Bible; it was referring to the decisions and counsels of God, written on 'the heavenly tablet'. God's secret purposes and decisions, which were not known to men, were now being revealed to Daniel. So chapters 9 and 10 have something in common as well, and we shall want to know what the difference is between them.

At this superficial level, perhaps we have one more stage to look at before we eventually get down to more serious matters. We're not doing this to play crossword puzzles with the word of God; we're trying to take God's word seriously. If you had to study a play by Euripides, Sophocles or Aeschylus, you'd try and take it seriously, wouldn't you? You'd read it as a whole, and ask what the relationships of the parts are to the whole, and so on. Shall we not spend equal energy on God's word? God knows how to write, you know!

The connection between chapter 2 and chapter 7

But now I'm full of hesitancy. Shall I be accused of that cardinal sin of being fanciful, which a scholar shouldn't be? However, if you could get your imagination really going, would you see any connection between Nebuchadnezzar's dream image in chapter 2 and the vision of the four beasts in chapter 7? Is there a common subject matter between them?

AUDIENCE: The nations.

DWG: And what about the nations? Come at it another way. Daniel's dream image is made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, iron and clay: a succession of metals, representing different types of strength. What on earth are they all about?

AUDIENCE: Quality and characteristics of the nations.

DWG: So, in chapter 2 they are in this order from head to foot: gold, silver, bronze, iron, iron-clay, representing the character of different nations? They don't all exist simultaneously; they are successive nations. So it is an analysis and a description in symbolic form of qualities, characteristics, as you say, of a succession of nations. What are these four beasts about in chapter 7?

AUDIENCE: The same nations.

DWG: Yes, a succession of the same nations. We shall need some differential diagnosis now. If you've got an image about a succession of nations represented by metals in an image of man, why do you need a vision of the same thing, but this time under the figure of a succession of wild beasts?

Chapter 2

Following our business of differential diagnosis, we notice that the gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay are eventually destroyed by the stone cut out without hands, which grows into a mountain, representing Christ and his messianic kingdom. When the four beasts are done away with, this time dominion is given to the Son of Man. Therefore, we are given two critiques of Gentile power, not just one; two analyses of Gentile politics; two descriptions of the succession of nations from Nebuchadnezzar onward. These are described twice, but under

very different symbols. If the symbols are telling us the characteristics of those nations and their political systems, then it is obvious that you can't have just one description, because, from the two points of view, they look very different.

Just to anticipate what we shall find. In the first instance, the critique that God gives Nebuchadnezzar of a Gentile empire is a magnificent thing. A huge man, so big it's a bit awesome, like a moor statue. You can't deny he's brilliant, can you? Look how the gold and silver sparkle, and how strong the iron is. This represents human government. God is being absolutely fair; it has been a magnificent accomplishment.

Maybe you don't think that of your government, but would you prefer to be living in a forest along with lions and tigers, pulling your wives along by the roots of their hair, and all that kind of thing? Don't you think that your ordered life here under human government is much better than such jungle chaos? The Greeks thought that man's progress was much improved by getting together in cities; cities joining up into countries, and devising some form of government with all the necessary accoutrements, like technology. It was a tremendous achievement. God is being fair. He isn't despising human government, in the sense that there is no authority but God. Nor should we despise human government.

It's a bit creaky at the moment, but isn't there hope that, by gradual development and experiment with different forms of government, be it gold or iron—though perhaps clay is a bit doubtful, we shall come to utopia? Why shouldn't the process carry on, and eventually some government will solve all the world's problems and bring us into a period of absolute prosperity and peace? That's one analysis.

The systems of government depicted by that image came unstuck. It had a terrible weakness in its feet, and was therefore unstable. Eventually it was destroyed and its place taken by a stone. They could have made a beautiful image like that in Babylon, with all their technology and skill; but it was a dream, of course, and it was all smashed and its place taken by a bit of raw stone. What kind of way is that to describe the messianic kingdom? Does the symbolism make sense?

Chapter 7

When you come to chapter 7 you've got another description of those same empires, with a very different analysis. Not a sophisticated big man, but four wild beasts. Is God being rude about human government? No, this is not some preacher exaggerating and going over the top; it is God telling us the simple truth.

Wild beasts are quite good in their own way. In Kenya I was taken by a missionary to see some lions. He was an intrepid kind of missionary, and drove the van right up close to a lion. We didn't feel particularly threatened. I closed the window because the lion had very bad breath; but other than that he was quite a benign creature. He'd just had giraffe for breakfast and was sleepily pleased with the world, and us in particular. If he'd been hungry and we were the only breakfast in sight, he would have had no compunction whatever. The name of the game is survival and morality doesn't come into it. To use a political term, they are what you might call *power blocs*—they're quite civilized so long as they're not threatened.

If a country's oil supplies were threatened, the morality of the situation wouldn't come into it; survival would be the name of the game. Governments aren't individuals. Individuals

have to consider morality, but the job of the government is to protect the nation. In the last analysis, morality doesn't come into it; it is survival.

In chapter 2 the empires are a magnificent accomplishment of the human spirit. But in chapter 7, when it comes to the final analysis they are amoral power blocs. It takes both analyses to give a fair-minded picture. Notice how God is fair in giving both sides of the story and we begin to see the literary analysis and some patterns begin to emerge. It's not just for the sake of playing crossword puzzles with the word of God. When God speaks, he gives a balanced picture and puts the two sides to it; teaching us how to think fairly and even-handedly, and to analyse both sides of a question.

When that spectacularly beautiful, refined image of man was destroyed, its place was taken by the messianic kingdom in the form of a stone cut out without hands: apparently crude, but powerful, and of almighty strength. The stone was cut out by divine power, that is, supernatural power. The image had a fatal weakness. Its feet were of clay, and therefore it had to be removed. Its place was taken by a rock that was cut out by supernatural power.

In chapter 7 the story is different. These beasts represent governments, power blocs, and their job is to protect their citizens at all costs. They went on succeeding one another until there arose a colossal beast (v. 7). It's an amalgam of all the previous beasts, so amoral that it bit and tore and stamped and destroyed with its colossal power. The trouble here was not a fatal weakness, as in the image; the trouble was its hideous strength. God was obliged to get rid of it before it destroyed the whole earth. It's interesting that it wasn't removed by a stone cut out without hands. This wild beast was replaced by the perfectly human specimen of man (v. 13).

I've been suggesting that there is a similarity between chapter two and chapter seven. The similarity isn't fanciful, it's deliberate and necessary. When we ask ourselves why they are similar, and yet why are they different, we begin to see why there must be two, and to understand their *functional relationship*. That raises a thought, doesn't it? Is there any connection between the others?

The connection between chapter 4 and chapter 9

Chapter 4: Babylon

Chapter four is about the discipline and restoration of Nebuchadnezzar, '*king of Babylon*'. It says so in the earlier text (1:1), and that's not a remark to be dismissed lightly. Babylon was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and this Nebuchadnezzar was the rebuildier and beautifier of Babylon city. He is famous in history for it, even more than for his politics. He had turned it into a magnificent city, with temples and ziggurats, the Hanging Gardens, the river running between the magnificent boulevards, and the Ishtar Gate. If you haven't seen it, go to the Pergamon Museum and see the tiles that came off the Ishtar Gate, brought by Schliemann³ to Berlin. Magnificent work: if you had them in your bathroom, you would never cease showing all your guests the beauty of these tiles, with their embossed artistry and symbolic figures. The last word!

³ Heinrich Schliemann (1822-1890).

So he had been responsible for this magnificent city, but he was warned of his pride—we shall come back to that another day. When he refused to repent, he was cut down. In his dream he was likened to a beautiful tree, performing the functions of a beautiful tree, God's gift to men. But Nebuchadnezzar had gone perverse, so his tree was cut down.

O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. (4:24–25)

Chapter 9: Jerusalem

Chapter 9 is about *the desolations of Jerusalem*. Do you see any point in these two cities in relation to each other? I'm sure you do. The two great cities that fill the later prophecies of the Old Testament are Babylon and Jerusalem, and when we come to the climax of the book of the Revelation it will be about these two cities again.

In chapter 4 the king of Babylon is cut down and left for seven periods of time before he is restored. In chapter 9 Daniel prays for Jerusalem city, which has been cut down (v. 18). Nebuchadnezzar himself was God's 'axe' to cut down Jerusalem. Isn't it interesting, then, that God was interested in an old Pagan king and took the trouble to discipline him under his judgment, and then restore him 'after seven times' (4:25 KJV).

For how long would Jerusalem be cut down? For seventy weeks, which is seventy times seven (9:24). Do you agree with God's sense of proportion? Tell me, was it a Jew who wrote this book of Daniel? Jerusalem was his beloved city; how did he manage to face this? The destroyer of what he believed to be the city of the great King was disciplined, and God restored the man after only seven times, whereas God's own city was cut down for seventy times seven. He will deal more severely with them. There's a verse in Amos that says, 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore . . .'—I will featherbed you? No—'I will punish you for all your iniquities' (3:2).

Ladies and gentlemen, whatever conclusion we come to about how to interpret the seventy times seven, we must take it seriously and try to understand it. The systematic theologians are right when they call upon other Scriptures and combine them all, and try to work out what it means. But before we get round to the detailed interpretation, I'd like you to see some of the point of these similarities, that they are not fanciful.

It's like a picture of a farm with Mr Farmer and his horse, and Mrs Farmer with the pails of milk down her side, and the goose, and a little child, and the tree, and the pond, and a church in the distance. They are all in proportion, and the artist wants you to notice how the steeple of the church balances with the tree. There's beautiful architecture in his picture.

God knows how to write, and there's beautiful architecture in his word. It isn't there just for the look of it; there is balance in the very message that God is wanting to get across. You haven't finally preached the whole of God's view of the succession of Gentile empires unless you've seen that the similarities and the differences are both necessary. That's why this simple stuff we're doing, the sort of ABC of Daniel, is not only interesting, but practical for your preaching.

You won't necessarily begin your sermon on Nebuchadnezzar's image, or the one on the four beasts, by asking your audience, 'Do you understand the structure of Daniel?' It could be double Dutch to them. You might preach one week on the marvellous thing human government is, and how we should pray for it. And the next week you'll put forward the other side of the story, and they'll learn by observing the structure of it.

If chapter 2, therefore, is deliberately set over against chapter 7, and it begins to look as if chapter 4 has something to say to us in light of chapter 9, are any of the remaining five chapters related? You might care to think about that yourselves overnight

The Importance of Detail

My brief for these seminars was to let you see the kind of approach that I personally would make to the book of Daniel, and I have taken the liberty to consider not only the book of Daniel but also the book of the Revelation. Both books are filled with prophetic visions and bear striking similarity to each other. It is an interesting and very fruitful discipline, therefore, to compare them. We shall look at the Revelation later in our studies.

To summarize so far

My own approach, as I said yesterday, is not that of a systematic theologian. His aim is to take all the pieces from the various books, put them together in order, and come to the doctrine of eschatology as a whole. It is based on the assumption that the word of God is inspired, that what God says by way of prophecy in one part of Scripture will not contradict what he says in some other part of Scripture. By putting them both together they will, in the end, build a logically coherent system of doctrine on prophetic matters.

Nothing that I say is meant to disparage that exercise in the study of God's word. Like all methods, it has a weakness into which its practitioners could fall if they weren't careful. They tend to abstract prophetic elements from the books in which they find them, not always taking due care to understand first how that prophetic element is related to what each book is saying as a whole.

It seems to me, therefore, that our first exercise in coming at any book of Scripture, is to try to understand what that book is saying as a book, and how the different elements combine and function together in a coherent message. When we have understood that, then we may take what we like out of it and put it with similar elements elsewhere to construct a systematic theology of any particular subject.

The book of Daniel does contain many chapters of straight, undiluted prophecy, but it also contains many chapters that are not in that sense immediately prophetic at all. Therefore, our approach was to list the contents of the book and see how it comes together as a whole, and how each of the parts functions in relation to one another.

To decide what those contents were, and how they should be analysed, we proposed three ideas: thought-flow, structure, and pattern—and the greatest of these three, you will remember, is thought-flow. Thought-flow to begin with, thought-flow in the middle, and thought-flow at the end—thought-flow is always the chief tool to use in the diagnosis of what a passage or a book is saying.

Following that, we saw that the first nine chapters of the book of Daniel are, in one sense, self-contained units. Each chapter comes to its own climax in its own way. Then we found

that the last three chapters in the book, as marked in most English translations, are just one unit in the book, and not three. In other words, chapters 10, 11 and 12 are all about one vision. We decided, therefore, on the grounds of thought-flow, that there are ten major elements in the book of Daniel.

Then we asked if these were ten individual items, nothing at all to do with one another; or did they show any evidence of being somehow related in content or idea? Very soon we found that various of the elements obviously had things in common.

Chapters 2 and 3 are both about images. Chapter 2 is Nebuchadnezzar's dream image; chapter 3 is his golden image.

Chapters 4 and 5 are explicitly linked, as many a gospel preacher has observed. The first is about the king who was warned and, instead of listening to the warning and modifying his behaviour, he persisted in his arrogance and was cut down. The very sentence that said he should be cut down, also said that the stump should be left, and he was restored (4:23). The second story is of the king who was warned by being reminded of what had happened to this first king, but he took no notice and persevered in his folly, 'though you knew all this' (5:22). For him, of course, there was no restoration. So the two stories are linked together by their very content. It's not me linking them together, it's the text itself.

Chapters 7 and 8 are obviously both about visions of beasts.

Details that are similar

We then noticed that the first five chapters are linked in another way. Once more, we were back at our thought-flow.

Chapter 1: we noticed at the very beginning how Nebuchadnezzar's attack upon Jerusalem is described briefly:

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. (1:1-2)

He brought the vessels of gold into the treasure house of his god. When you pause to think, that is a remarkable detail to be selected by the Spirit of God at that juncture. In spite of all the other very significant things he did, almost the first thing that is pointed out is that Nebuchadnezzar not only took King Jehoiakim, but he took these vessels out of the house of the Lord. And then we're told what he did with them. He put them into the house of his god in Babylon. He did it with pagan reverence, because he respected them as vessels dedicated to a god. He would have thought that his own god, Marduk, was more important than Jehovah. Nonetheless, Jehovah was a god, and Nebuchadnezzar reverently put them into the house of his god. We are told this detail at the very beginning of the book.

Chapter 5 has recurrent mention of these same vessels. In the middle of his banquet, Belshazzar called for the vessels to be brought out of the house of the Lord, and before all his guests he drank from them, thus committing a desecration and a sacrilege against almighty God. In the drama of that story in chapter 5, we noticed that the drinking from those vessels

is the crucial point. When the king had drunk from them and put them back on the table, at that moment a hand appeared, writing on the wall. It pronounced God's sentence upon Belshazzar. It was in that night that Belshazzar was slain and the city was taken by the invading armies of Darius the Mede. As far as the flow of the history throughout these narratives is concerned, here we come to the end of Babylon.

So, on the grounds of thought-flow, we start with Babylon's earlier attack on Jerusalem. This was only Nebuchadnezzar's preliminary attack. After he had arrived at Jerusalem and done these things, news came that his father was dead, and he had to hurry back to Babylon to be crowned king. Later he came back and destroyed the temple. But, anyway, chapter 1 is the beginning of Babylon's attack on Jerusalem and chapter 5 is the end of Babylon, so it stands as a historical unit.

Then we noticed in the other five chapters that there are obvious similarities.

Chapter 2: Nebuchadnezzar's dream image is about a succession of four Gentile world powers that would follow each other, but eventually be removed by God.

Chapter 7 is likewise a prophecy in picture form of those very same four world powers. Beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's empire, they would follow each other, and eventually be put aside by God.

Details that differ

We paused at that stage to consider the significance. What should we make of it? We used a simple analogy, and reminded ourselves that if you get a series of similar things with many points in common, the first thing to do is to notice where they are similar. The second thing, of course, is to employ a little differential diagnosis, and ask where the differences lie. You'll remember the three gentlemen in the doctor's surgery, each with a sore throat. In that they were all the same, but the doctor didn't just give aspirin to all three. He wasn't deceived by the fact that they all had similar symptoms. With man number one, the sore throat was the result of shouting his head off at the local football match, so the doctor told him to go home and shut up. With man number two, he had an infection of the larynx, and his treatment was a little penicillin. With the third man, it turned out to be more grave than the other two. The doctor took a specimen because he feared it was cancer of the throat. Three sore throats, but the important thing is the difference between them.

Two chapters then, dealing with the succession of great world imperial powers of ancient times. In that, they are similar. But then we looked at the differences. Why the difference in imagery? They are not simply a repetition of the same thing, and the imagery used shows us this. There are two different ways of looking at these empires, so they give not contradictory but complementary analyses and critiques of Gentile politics.

And then, when it comes to the Gentile powers being removed and replaced by Messiah's kingdom, that kingdom is imaged differently.

In chapter 2 Messiah's kingdom is represented as a stone, cut out without hands by supernatural power. That rough-hewn stone smashes the sophisticated and beautiful image, and then itself grows into a mountain.

In chapter 7 the four beasts are wild beasts, and we considered what that meant when they were put aside. The messianic kingdom that replaced them is seen, not now as a rough-hewn

stone; in vivid contrast to the wild beasts, it is represented in the person of its head, the ideal human, the Son of Man, and the saints.

We looked at some of the other similarities that were here and there, and at the end of the session I set a little homework. I suggested you might care to look overnight to see whether these remaining five chapters are in any way bracketed together, as the first five were. Doubtless you are brimming over with all kinds of suggestions.

Other analyses of the book

After the session some of you were good enough to remind me that there are other analyses of the book of Daniel, and asked what I thought about them. When it comes to analyses of books of the Bible, you will find almost as many as there are books, and as many schemes as there are preachers. The cynical would react to that by saying they can't all be right; they could all be wrong. Are they not subjective anyway? Doesn't this kind of thing impose the commentator's own view and analysis upon Scripture, and it's not, surely, part of Scripture itself?

All right, if we take that view, I would be prepared to plead a little bit guilty. I take comfort from the fact that all the most famous preachers that I know of have five points, or three points, when they are expounding a passage. Generally, it's three, and they mostly end with 'tion', or other such things. These are methods of getting it across, and so long as the preachers allow other preachers to have different analyses, there's no great harm done, is there?

The book of Daniel was written in two languages

Let me now mention one of the most famous other analyses, and then say how I would react to it. The book of Daniel, as you may know, was written in two different languages. Some chapters, notably chapter 1 and a little bit of chapter 2, were written in Hebrew. The rest of chapters 2–7 were written in Aramaic, called in more ancient translations Chaldean. Then chapters 8–12 were again written in Hebrew.

Liberal scholars have, therefore, suggested that the book is actually from two quite distinct sources, one Hebrew and the other Aramaic. They were originally independent works, or at least independent material, by different authors. Someone subsequently got those two different sources, amalgamated them and put them together as one book, but they weren't originally one book.

A chiastic structure

That idea was strengthened when a certain French scholar pointed out that, if you look at the chapters written in Aramaic, they form what is called a *chiasm*; or simply an 'ends-to-middle'. The chapters concerned are 2–7. So if you list them in your mind, you will notice the following:

Chapter 2: Nebuchadnezzar's dream image is about the succession of four imperial powers. That would be the *number one* in this scheme.

Chapter 7: Daniel's vision of four empires, and that would be *number six*. One and six balance each other. They're both about the same topic, and with that, of course, I would agree.

Chapter 3: The three Jewish young men refuse to obey Nebuchadnezzar's command to bow down to his image, and for that reason they are thrown into the burning fire from which God delivers them. This now becomes *number two*.

Chapter 6: This is *number five*, and what a similar story it is. The decree goes forth that nobody should pray to any god except to the emperor for a period of certain days. Having heard and understood the decree, Daniel goes home and deliberately opens his window and prays as he always did, to the God of Israel and not to His Imperial Majesty. So he was thrown into the den of lions, just like his three friends were thrown into the furnace of fire. And just like them, Daniel was delivered by a miracle of God. So there is an obvious similarity.

Chapters 4 and 5: Stories about the two kings—these become *numbers three and four*.

- 1 and 6 = chapter 2 with chapter 7.
- 2 and 5 = chapter 3 with chapter 6.
- 3 and 4 = chapter 4 with chapter 5.

So there's a nice neat scheme for you. It is what is technically called a *chiasm*, that the first agrees with the last, and the second with the second last, and the third with the third last, and it makes a nice pattern. As you see, my analysis would agree with some of that. But if this is the original layout, there is a conflict between that and the analysis that I have suggested. So what shall we say? You have your unbiased choice, ladies and gentlemen.

What is my comment?

I hope I would not try to support my analysis at any cost, but analyses do have a limited use. Do they or do they not help us to come to understand what God is saying? While I firmly believe in literary analysis of books such as Daniel, let me now say quite clearly that structure and pattern are not the most important things. When you come to a book there are three things: thought-flow, structure and pattern, the greatest being thought-flow. Structure and pattern are no substitute for the patient exposition of the detail of any particular passage. First and last, it's the detail of the passage that counts. The exposition that is liable to be right is the one that is able to expound the whole of the detail, and not just one bit of it.

As a man given much to structure and pattern I want to emphasize that. When some people see patterns they begin to think, subconsciously perhaps, that patterns are the thing, and they get up in the pulpit and preach patterns. Some in the congregation wonder what on earth has happened to the word of God; they can't make it out and find it difficult to follow. More than that, when people begin to see patterns, they generally fasten on one element in a story or paragraph, and to them that becomes the predominant thing. They forget that their real task is not to pick out one element here and one element there; their task is to expound every detail of each story. If you've got the detail of each story right, you won't need to say much about pattern to your congregation, nor structure either. You will occasionally dig their ribs, of course, and say, 'Do you remember when we were in chapter 2, it talked about these things? It put one point of view; now this one puts another point of view; and we need both points of view.'

Chapter six

Chapters 3 and 6 look so very similar. The story in chapter 3 is of the three young men who were cast into the furnace of fire because they wouldn't bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's image, and the story in chapter 6 is about a man who got thrown into a den of lions because he wouldn't obey the king's command that he should pray only to the king.

Yes, but we're interested to see whether this one in chapter 6 is related to anything that comes after it, for chapter 6 is in Aramaic and so is chapter 3, but chapters 8–12 are in Hebrew. From the deeper question of *source*, were these chapters in Aramaic originally from a separate source and by a different author, or from the start were they an integral part of the book of Daniel? Is this story in Daniel 6 related to the whole of the second section, some of which was written in Hebrew? That's an exceedingly important literary question to do with the sources of material in Scripture.

Suppose we forget structure and pattern, and start expounding the detail of chapter 6—not merely the fact that Daniel was thrown into a den of lions, like these fellows were thrown into the furnace—what should we discover?

It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty princes, which should be over the whole kingdom; And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first: that the princes might give accounts unto them, and the king should have no damage. Then this Daniel was preferred above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm. Then the presidents and princes sought to find occasion against Daniel concerning the kingdom; but they could find none occasion nor fault; forasmuch as he was faithful, neither was there any error or fault found in him. Then said these men, We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God. Then these presidents and princes assembled together to the king, and said thus unto him, King Darius, live for ever. All the presidents of the kingdom, the governors, and the princes, the counsellors, and the captains, have consulted together to establish a royal statute, and to make a firm decree, that whosoever shall ask a petition of any God or man for thirty days, save of thee, O king, he shall be cast into the den of lions. Now, O king, establish the decree, and sign the writing, that it be not changed, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. Wherefore king Darius signed the writing and the decree. Now when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went into his house; and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime. Then these men assembled, and found Daniel praying and making supplication before his God. Then they came near, and spake before the king concerning the king's decree; Hast thou not signed a decree, that every man that shall ask a petition of any God or man within thirty days, save of thee, O king, shall be cast into the den of lions? The king answered and said, The thing is true, according to the law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not. Then answered they and said before the king, That Daniel, which is of the children of the captivity of Judah, regardeth not thee, O king, nor the decree that thou hast signed, but maketh his petition three times a day. Then the king, when he heard these words, was sore displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him: and he laboured till the going down of the sun to deliver him. Then these men

assembled unto the king, and said unto the king, Know, O king, that the law of the Medes and Persians is, That no decree nor statute which the king establisheth may be changed. (6:1–15 KJV)

You'd have to be asleep to fail to notice that this chapter is something about a *writing*. God's way of writing Scripture is, in the end, very simple. When he wants to say something, he says it; and if he wants you to take notice of it, he keeps on saying it. So only those who are really asleep fail to notice it! Yes, Daniel was put into the lions' den, and God delivered him, but what was it all about? That's the thing. And yes, these boys were thrown into the furnace, but what was that about? It isn't about a writing in chapter 3, as you know from the text. The story in chapter 6 is; so what's the importance of it?

In chapter 6 you have a very striking feature of the Medo-Persian constitution. In fact, it's the first faint glimmers of the rule of law, as distinct from an arbitrary monarch. You see, if you were in Nebuchadnezzar's realm, you would find His Majesty was quite arbitrary. If he liked you, he kept you alive; if not, he executed you. 'Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled' (5:19). The king's word was law, even if it changed from one day to the next.

The Medo-Persians had a better system. They had begun to advance in political science somewhat, and had got this concept of law being above even the monarch. So that, once the king had signed a writing and passed the law, the law could not be changed—until suitable circumstances, of course. But they had the beginnings of a glimmer of a concept of the rule of law to which everybody, even the king on the throne, had to be subject. The king himself couldn't change it when it was signed, sealed and settled.

That is a very important thing, if you are a serious student of political science. Why should it be emphasized here in the book of Daniel? Well, let's think of the whole concept of the book. Daniel was a Hebrew and lived under what was supposed to be a theocracy. But, because of Israel's sin and disobedience, God abolished the throne of Judah for the time being. The princes, like Daniel and others, were sent off to Babylon, where they had to live under the Gentile systems of politics.

Daniel's career and testimony

The interesting thing about Daniel's book is that, true Jew that he was, he was prepared to enter the education of the Gentile system. He did not say, 'I am a Hebrew; I will not go to your university. It's a pagan university, and I won't go to it.' He went to their university and took a degree. As you know, there were certain things in that university he objected to most strongly, and, at the risk of his career, he protested and wouldn't participate. But God was with him. For the rest of his life he worked in the civil service, first of Babylon, and then of Medo-Persia, and rose to eminence in both. Under the Medo-Persians, he was head of the civil service. He was a man of tremendous experience.

He believed in the coming of the Messiah. As you see from the prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar's image, he believed that there was a fatal flaw in Gentile political practice and theory, and Gentile government would eventually be destroyed. He believed that the only hope for mankind was the coming of God's Messiah, and that, when he came and set up his kingdom, it wouldn't be that earth's kingdoms and Gentile politics have improved and somehow turned into the kingdom of God on earth. Daniel didn't hold that view. He held that

Gentile systems have a fatal flaw and would one day be demolished. The kingdom of God is not one kingdom in that series in the image. The kingdom of the Messiah is a completely different thing. When it comes, it will smash the rest and put itself in their place. That's what Daniel believed.

What did that mean to Daniel? Was he a prophecy-monger who preached that the coming of the Messiah would happen on such and such a date? Did he say, 'Because the Messiah is coming, the only thing to do is to get out of society and sit on a mountain and wait'? No, until the kingdom of the Messiah came, he was prepared to work as a civil servant in these various systems. But he was under no illusion; he didn't imagine that the glorious age of bliss and peace was coming through human politics. In his analyses, he honestly and fairly gives us critiques of the Gentile world governments.

His critique of Nebuchadnezzar's dream image acknowledged the brilliance and worth of man's effort at government. In spite of all its flaws, human government has been a magnificent achievement among human beings. If you had to make a choice, would you rather live in Toronto or a rainforest? In this vision of Gentile government, God himself recognizes all their different qualities: the gold, the silver, the bronze, the steel. But don't be deceived: that great achievement in human politics will not prove to be the road along which God establishes the age of peace in our world. Why not? Because it has a flaw.

In chapter 7 we saw human government from a completely different point of view. Not now a sophisticated image of a man, great and glorious in his achievement, but four beasts. And we saw what that meant. They are quite content to purr away, if they are at ease and have all the economic things they need; but if they fall short of their supplies, you'd find their morality would go out of the window. They're going to have what they need to survive, and if that means stealing it from other folks, they'll do that, or they'll slaughter and destroy, and they'll wage war. Even with all their sophisticated techniques, they are amoral power blocs. As they see it, their job is simply to protect their nation at whatever cost. Survival is the name of the game. That aspect of the nations obviously won't lead to the coming kingdom of God. It will have to be put aside, and the kingdom of God will take its place.

Pattern or no pattern, chapter 6 is another very serious critique of Gentile politics. It starts by admitting this tremendous advance that had been made in political thinking among the Medo-Persians. Not now the arbitrary rule of an absolute monarchy, like Nebuchadnezzar's was, but the concept of the rule of law. The leaders of the state would come to some decision and make a law, an interdict—a *writing*. They would sign the writing, and nobody could alter it, not even the king himself. All were equal in that sense under the law. It was only the first glimmer of it, and the Greeks developed it further in their political philosophy. When they hit upon this notion of *isonomia*—equality under the law, they thought it was a tremendous advance, but it didn't take long to see that there was a flaw. Later philosophers argued that the law was a bad thing, and the way to the wonderful age of peace and blessing was to go back to nature rather than law. In the later Greek philosophers, there was a great deal of discussion about those two terms, *nature* and *law*.

They started by thinking that nature was pretty poor and beastly; people eating each other, and all that kind of thing. It was much better when man emerged from the forests, built cities and, therefore, became civilized. Naturally, they had to have laws to govern it, and it

proceeded from absolute monarchs and dictators to a full-blown democracy, like in Athens city. They thought it was marvellous, and then they found out what you see from Daniel 6, that the rule of law itself can turn into being the most hideous dictator there ever was.

Simply in devising this kind of politics, depending on the rule of law will not be the final answer. It has all sorts of benefits in a democracy; I'm not insulting it. The lowliest citizen has rights before the law. That is a great advance, and has brought a tremendous freedom. We don't have to deny it's an advance, but if you propose the notion that human society will eventually come to an age of perfection simply by that method, you are grievously mistaken.

That is Daniel's testimony. All these advances in the end will come to nothing. God will have to intervene, remove Gentile power, and at the coming of our blessed Lord, set up the messianic kingdom. This is not the word of some prophecy-monger, but the testimony of a man who rose to be the highest official in the civil service of the Medo-Persian Empire. At the end of a long life of experience, he still retained his faith in the coming of the Lord and God's prophetic programme. He still believed that, while we should do everything in our power to help forward the society around us, to bless it and serve it, our hope does not lie in that, but in the coming of the Messiah. They may have had the rule of law and signed a writing that could be not changed, but you've seen through it long since. The question is, who makes the law?

As a distant cousin to you folks over here, I can't help noticing what has happened to the constitution of America. The Pilgrim Fathers fled from Europe to escape persecution and have freedom of conscience to worship God, so they set up a constitution, with the separation of church and state. They didn't mean what's now happening, did they? You scarcely may mention the word 'God' or 'Christ' in a public school or university. The curious situation is that in post-Communist Russia you can teach the Bible in schools. In free America, under the law, you mustn't. The rule of law is wonderful, but it's depends who writes it and who makes the law.

The plot against Daniel

The story is all too true to life. Daniel rose to eminence, and the other chiefs in the civil service were getting jealous. They wanted to get him out and install themselves. They couldn't find fault with him in his daily work and his loyalty to the government; all they could do was to find exception in the law of his God. As civil servants, they had a magnificent way of putting things, and let's imagine them coming one morning to His Majesty.

'We have observed what a marvellous empire you have, full of different ethnic groups and a multitude of religions, but they tend sometimes to be a bit divisive. We don't want to ban religion, but could we adopt some method to make it cohere a little bit? For a limited period, could we pass a decree that nobody should pray to any god except you, and you be the representative of the divine principle? They'll be able to go back and pray to their own gods in due course. There's one great spirit going through all religions and they're all about the same thing in the end. Call him Zeus, or Marduk, or anything you like, it's really all the same. We'd like to emphasize the sameness in religion, and it would make for peace in your empire.'

'Yes,' said the king, 'but I don't know that I would be the fitting one to be prayed to.'

‘Well, you are the emperor and the gods must have intended you to sit upon the throne. Who but you would be a fitting symbol of the divine principle?’

‘There’s a good deal of sense in what you say,’ said the king.

‘Sign on the dotted line, because this is really an urgent matter,’ they said.

So the writing was signed, and it could not be changed. Then the king discovered their motivation, but it was too late.

Forgive my imagination, but can you see the signs of things to come—‘Why can’t there be one universal form of religion?’ It will come; its name will be Babylon, and it will ride the beast (see Rev 17). It will look the highest bit of sanity and sane procedure there ever was, and anybody who disagrees will be the most bigoted trouble-maker—‘Well, he deserved to be thrown to the lions anyway, for making trouble.’

Pattern or no pattern, structure or no structure, you don’t just tell this story in chapter 6 as a story of someone who refused to obey the king, and got thrown into the lions. Otherwise, you’d merely be retelling this one in chapter 3. They refused to obey the king and got put into the furnace. Similar situations, but the principle at stake in each one is different.

And I come back to my contention, if you are expounding chapter 6 you don’t say, ‘Well, look how it agrees with chapter 3 or chapter 1.’ The structure is there to help us to see what the relationship is, but when you preach it, it’s the detail of each story that you must expound and we must see to it that we expound all the detail, and not just a little bit of it.

You know the rest of the story. One day they came to His Majesty and they said, ‘A curious thing has happened; we can’t believe it. There was a window open, and somebody was praying. It was Daniel, praying to his God.’

And the king said, ‘But you have to make exceptions in some cases, don’t you?’

‘No, Your Majesty, it’s the rule of law.’

And out comes the true reason. It’s not any civil service, but there’s a higher power behind all the multifarious religions: the god of this world himself (2 Cor 4:4).

‘The writings’ link chapter 6 with the remainder of the book

It’s a very small point, but, whatever your structure, whatever your pattern, first and last it must be the exposition of the actual detail. We must expound all the detail, and not just the one bit in our structure that seems to link it with something else.

If, therefore, the writing lies at the very heart of this story—the law, that once written could not be changed, let me ask you a question. Has that theme of the *writing* got any connection with anything else in this section, and have you come across any other place in Daniel that emphasizes the writing? Of course you have. The last two are obvious cases. When Daniel was talking about Jerusalem, he opened his window and prayed on the basis of the books and the writing about God’s plan for Jerusalem and its restoration (ch. 9). And then in the final section, there came a vision of the man above the river, and his attendant angels who conveyed the meaning of the revelation to him. Said the angel, ‘I will tell you what is inscribed in the *writing of truth*.’ (10:21 NASB). Structure or no structure, you ought to shout ‘Hallelujah’ at that point! ‘The writing that couldn’t be changed’, and now there is another writing.

In chapter 9 you’ll notice that Daniel is praying on the basis of what then constituted the Bible; on the basis of Jeremiah’s book. But here, when the angel comes to make known to

Daniel what stands in the writing of truth, the angel isn't talking of the Bible. He's talking of what's written in the heavenly counsels of God, God's purposes. And I tell you, ladies and gentlemen, that shall never be changed. Kingdoms may come and kingdoms may go, and political philosophies come into fashion and pass out of fashion, but the writing of truth is for ever. 'For ever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens' (Ps 119:89).

Whichever structure you decide is the right one, when you get round to preaching Daniel, you'll have to preach that connection, won't you? And in spite of the fact that chapter 6 was written in Aramaic and chapter 10 in Hebrew, the difference of language now makes no difference whatsoever. This was obviously the intended arrangement of material. Likewise, chapter 1 (Hebrew) is linked to chapter 5 (Aramaic). Chapter 1 is the ritual side of Israel's religion, but both chapters are about the same vessels. Chapter 6 (Aramaic), the writing of man—the constitutional law that couldn't be changed, is deliberately answered in chapter 10 (Hebrew) by the writing of truth.

I'd be concerned that we all see how we came to that, and why. I repeat, structure or no structure, we are concerned, firstly, with thought-flow, and with this basic principle of exposition. The danger, I repeat, in seeing similarities, is that you take one element out of one and one element out of another, see the similarity and jump to your structure. Then the danger is that you don't expound all the detail of it, and it's expounding the detail that is our job.

Of course, it helps to see structure, but the chief job is to expound the detail. It's when we did that, of course, that this matter of the writing came up. That is not my subjective impression, ladies and gentlemen. If you think it is, count out how many times the words 'the writing' occurs in Daniel 6. God keeps on saying the same thing until we get the point. Chapter 6 is about the writing that couldn't be changed, and chapter 10 is about the writing that never will be changed.

Structure and Pattern

I have distributed among you my own little analysis of the book of Daniel. Just let me explain one or two things about it.

<p>Ch. 1 Nebuchadnezzar reverently places God's vessels in his idol's temple. Daniel and others refuse to indulge in pagan impurities. Court officials sympathetic. Daniel and his colleagues' physical and mental powers vindicated. They are promoted to high office.</p>	<p>Ch. 6 Darius bans prayer to God for thirty days. Daniel refuses to cease practising the Jewish religion. Court officials intrigue against him. Daniel's political loyalty to the king vindicated. He is restored to high office.</p>
<p>Ch. 2 A survey of the whole course of Gentile imperial power. Four empires in the form of a man. The fatal weakness: an incoherent mixture of iron and clay in the feet. The whole man destroyed by the stone cut out by divine power. The universal messianic kingdom set up.</p>	<p>Ch. 7 A survey of the whole course of Gentile imperial power. Four empires in the form of wild beasts. The hideous strength: a frightening mixture of animal destructiveness with human intelligence. The final beast destroyed and universal domination given to the Son of Man.</p>
<p>Ch. 3 Nebuchadnezzar thinks that 'no god can deliver (the Jews) out of his hand'. He commands them to worship his god. The Jews defy him. They are preserved in the furnace. God's ability to deliver is thereby demonstrated.</p>	<p>Ch. 8 The little horn: 'none can deliver out of his hand'. He stops the Jews' worship of their God, and defies God himself. God's sanctuary and truth are finally vindicated.</p>
<p>Ch. 4 The glory of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar is warned that he deserves discipline. He persists in pride, is chastised, and his chastisement lasts for 7 times. He is then restored.</p>	<p>Ch. 9 The desolations of Jerusalem: Israel's sins have brought on them the curse warned of in the Old Testament. Jerusalem will be restored, but Israel's persistence in sin will bring on further desolations lasting to the end of 70 x 7 years. Then Jerusalem will be finally restored.</p>
<p>Ch. 5 Belshazzar makes a god of his pleasures, but still recognizes the gods of stone etc. The <i>writing on the wall</i>. The end of Belshazzar and the end of the Babylonian Empire.</p>	<p>Chs. 10–12 The king exalts himself above every god, and regards no god. The <i>writing of truth</i>. The series of apparent 'ends' leading up to 'the time of the end' and eventually to THE END itself.</p>

As you will see, it follows my notion that thought-flow would tell us that there are ten major elements in the book. The first five are bracketed together because of Nebuchadnezzar's raid upon Jerusalem when he takes the golden vessels (ch. 1); and those vessels come to the fore again at the crucial climactic moment in chapter 5 that spells the end of the Babylonian Empire.

In our last session I argued that chapters 6–12 are intended by the compiler of Daniel to form a set, in spite of the fact that they are written in two different languages. In chapter 6, this matter of *the writing* is not some minor circumstantial detail, but it lies at the very heart of the story, not just as a word but as an important concept in politics. Therefore, it is an integral part of Daniel's critique of Gentile politics, its strength and then its weakness. Chapter 6 shows the power of that concept, but introduces us to a story that exhibits the fatal flaw in that political theory and practice.

So, the five elements on the second side of our table of contents are bracketed together because, when you come to the last element, again it is a question of *the writing of truth*, a very unusual phrase in the Old Testament. It's not the *Bible*, it's the heavenly counsels before the throne of God, now brought down to Daniel, and he's assured that these writings will never be changed.

The groupings within each set

On the left side, in the first set, there's the introductory chapter 1; chapters 2 and 3 are about images; chapters 4 and 5 are about two kings and their discipline.

On the right side, in the second set, there's the introductory chapter 6; chapters 7–8 are about the two visions of beasts; chapter 9, the book of Jeremiah and its prophecy about the timing of Israel's desolation and her restoration; in chapters 10–12 there are the final two visions concerned with this matter of books and the fulfilment of what is written in them: the writing of truth, and how it shall be worked out in history.

When you compare the elements in the first set with elements in the second set, there are striking similarities. Chapters 2 and 7 are obvious; though we emphasized that, where you get similarities, the more important thing is to notice the differences between them.

It might be worth pointing out again the very poignant similarities and contrasts between chapter 4 in the first set and chapter 9 in the second. Chapter 4 is about the king of Babylon and the glory of Babylon, 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power?' (v. 30). Whereas chapter 9 is about Jerusalem city. No theologian or student of prophecy will need to be told how important these two cities are, both in the ancient world, and what they stand for. In two chapters of the book of Revelation, Babylon is described in great detail, and then it is judged to make way for the bride of the Lamb, the new Jerusalem, described likewise in great detail.

So then, Daniel 4: Babylon in its glory; Daniel 9: Jerusalem in its desolations. In chapter 4 you meet Nebuchadnezzar, the king that did the desolation to Jerusalem city. It is the story of how God had to discipline Nebuchadnezzar. The breathtaking and unexpected thing is how God restored him. I wonder what the Jews made of that bit when they first read about the desecrator of their city being restored by God? Anyway, the time of Nebuchadnezzar's chastisement was to be seven times, and we noticed the emphasis on its duration.

Over in chapter 9, it's a question of Jerusalem's discipline and desolations. How long before it shall be restored? Not seven times, it's seventy times seven. These are obvious connections of thought. It's not a mere matter of something like a railway timetable; the disciplines of God upon men and nations are an exceedingly important part of history. It is a thing to be observed, that God thought it worthwhile disciplining Nebuchadnezzar, Pagan though he was, and no critical thing is stated of that wonderful tree that represented Nebuchadnezzar in the vision.

God's word is in the detail

I pause at this juncture just to fill in a little of the detail. My old hobby horse: while thought-flow, structure and pattern are important, in the last analysis you must expound every detail of every story.

In the visions of chapter 4, we have moved from politics. Chapters 2 and 3 are about politics and government; chapters 4 and 5 are about what you might call *culture*, in the very broadest sense of that term. In chapter 4 it is high culture: the beauty, the architecture, the city planning, the gardens, the ziggurats—all magnificent, exciting stuff. Nebuchadnezzar was the rebuilders of that Babylon and it became famous throughout the world for sheer beauty and glory. It was a magnificent product of the human spirit.

The visions of my head as I lay in bed were these: I saw, and behold, a tree in the midst of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all. The beasts of the field found shade under it, and the birds of the heavens lived in its branches, and all flesh was fed from it. (4:10–12)

Nebuchadnezzar himself is likened to a beautiful tree. In those dry and sometimes arid countries, to have a beautiful city like Babylon with its gardens and a river running through, what a delight that was to the human spirit.

Is art wrong? Ought Christians to be interested in architecture? Well, yes, perhaps; but what about literature and music? What did God think of Nebuchadnezzar and his city and its art? Look at the Ishtar Gate; those blue enamel tiles are magnificent even yet. You'd like them in your bathroom! The design of the place, and those great boulevards, what does God think of it?

Is Daniel saying, 'Rotten worldly stuff, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole; Jerusalem is the thing'? Well, compared with Babylon, Jerusalem was like a city in the outback, a tiny little affair. No, God thought it was marvellous. When he came to depict it, and Nebuchadnezzar who had built it, it was like a tree, beautiful to look at, with lovely fruit, and shade for the repose of the people. As Christians we must have a healthy and balanced attitude on life, mustn't we? Art and beauty, and architecture, and city planning, and gardens and things are part of God's provision for us.

The tree had leaves that were fair to look upon. You'll notice God's taste, and the order of it. In the garden of Eden, he made a lot of trees. In the first place, they were good to look at, and then they were good for food. Sometimes Christians get that reversed, particularly in difficult economic times, and think the more important thing is potatoes for your stomach

rather than pictures on your wall. But the God who's interested in the stomach is also interested in the mind.

If you had a friend in hospital, dangerously ill, you wouldn't necessarily take him a sack of potatoes, you'd take him a bunch of flowers. One hospital I knew of, they took autoharps in and played them quietly to the patients who were desperately ill. For some patients, the sound of the music helped them in their will to live and recover. What a marvellous God, and what a lovely creation; we've no need to criticize it as though it were in itself bad. Carrots are good—except when the farmers use poison in the insecticide, and so are art and architecture, and all the rest of the lovely things. But they can get poisoned, and we have to look out for the poison.

Why did God get upset about it all?

Remember, we must read the detail of the story! The tree was good for food, and a relief to the colossal temperatures in that part of the world. It brought sanity. Nebuchadnezzar was walking on the roof of his palace, surveying all this, and in that moment a surge of pride came through the emperor's heart. 'Is not this great Babylon, which I have built . . . for [my] glory' (4:30). His whole end and object was his own glory. The man had lost his hold on the true God. He was using all his gifts, but not for the glory of God and in fellowship with God. That is a grievous sin.

If we will take the lovely things of life, and in our love for them lose our love for God, and our motivation becomes our own glory instead of God's glory, then we are on a dangerous and slippery slope. That is why John says, 'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father' (1 John 2:15–16).

These things may be good in themselves, but if they draw our hearts away from God, then the good things are almost worse than the bad things. I fear sometimes there will be more people in hell because of good things than bad things. The majority of people don't like horrible crime and evil, wickedness and debauchery, but they can love the good things so well that they've no time for the God who gave them.

Here's a bright young girl. She's an absolute marvel at music, and when you listen to her play, you say, 'Thank God for this marvellous ability given to human beings.'

And you say to the young lady, 'That's marvellous music, isn't it? And how are you getting on with the Lord?'

'Oh,' she says, 'I'm not interested in religion and God. My music is what I'm interested in.'

If she continues like that, and has no time for the God who gave it, one day she'll go to where there is no music any more.

This is an important dimension in life, isn't it? Let me use the illustration of a young lady with a shiny new engagement ring. You can't fail to notice it, somehow.

'Oh,' you say, 'is that an engagement ring?'

'Yes, it is indeed,' she says.

'Is it gold?' you ask.

'No, it's platinum with diamonds.'

'It's a magnificent work of art,' you say. 'Whoever has got you as his betrothed is to be congratulated.'

Suppose the girl replied, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, who gave you the ring?'

'Nobody gave it to me!'

What would you say next? The beautiful engagement ring has lost all but its aesthetic meaning. Isn't that the tragedy in life, when men and women try to enjoy the lovely things of life and culture without God?

When Nebuchadnezzar wouldn't repent, God 'cut his tree down.' He didn't intend to destroy it: the angels were given instructions to preserve the stump and bind it around to make sure it grew again. Nebuchadnezzar had to be taught a lesson, and God touched him in such a way that, instead of being the magnificent emperor and past master of all things to do with art and architecture, he started to live like a veritable animal. He didn't even cut his hair or his nails; he went out like an animal, and ate the grass upon which he lived and walked.

The difference between structure and pattern

Some of you have been asking me what I mean by structure and pattern and thought-flow, and in particular the difference between structure and pattern in the book.

Structure

The first five chapters are to do with Israel in relation to Babylon. The second five, Israel in relation to Medo-Persia, and, eventually, to Greece.

Pattern

You will find a similar idea recurring through the book of Daniel, and that is, man and beast, man and animal. The imagery that God uses in these visions and histories is not arbitrary; it's meant to be taken seriously.

It isn't just a code; so that, if you know the first beast is Babylon, you don't need to listen to the imagery any more. When you see this great beast, you can say, 'Babylon'. Some people treat prophecy like that, but prophecy is not normally meant to be code.

For instance, in Revelation 5 the challenge goes out:

'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?' And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly . . . And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . has conquered.' (vv. 2-5)

What does it mean by 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah'? So I ask some dear brother, and he says, 'that's the Lord Jesus.'

Why didn't it say 'the Lord Jesus'? It would make it so much more simple: 'Weep no more for *the Lord Jesus* has conquered to open the seals.'

Then I continue reading: 'I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes' (v. 6). And I ask, 'Who is this Lamb with seven eyes and seven horns?' He says, 'That's the Lord Jesus.'

Why can't it be straightforward? Why must it be written in code? Well, at least I know what the key to the code is, so I needn't bother about this Lamb with seven horns: it's the Lord Jesus. So we'll rewrite it, shall we? That would make Revelation simple—I'm sure someone will do it one of these days, and make a lot of money by selling a Bible re-written for the simple to understand.

What would you lose if it were merely a code?

'Weep no more; behold the *Lord Jesus* has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals. And . . . I saw the *Lord Jesus* standing . . .' It was never in doubt who the Lion and the Lamb were. It's the Lord Jesus, of course, but what is the Lord Jesus like? If you want to get some concept of the Lord Jesus, he is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Do you know what lions are like, and why he's the Lion of the tribe of Judah? There's a whack of history behind that. The prophets talk about kings as lions.

It's not code; it's imagery to help us grasp with our imagination and our emotion—and our intellect as well for that matter—something about the Lord Jesus. He's a Lion, a great lion of history: the Lion of the tribe of Judah. Why, then, is he called a Lamb? That's another aspect of the Lord Jesus, and again we need the symbolism to enrich our appreciation and understanding of its significance. That's how prophetic imagery is normally to be used.

Sometimes when people ask a difficult question—for example, '*who* are the twenty-four elders?'—you can get out of answering it by saying, 'I'll answer you that when you tell me *what* they are.'

They say, 'What do you mean, *what* they are?'

Well, they're elders, aren't they? What are elders? Why are they represented as elders, and why is their clothing mentioned? 'Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads' (Rev 4:4).

More of that in a later study.

A recurring pattern: the imagery of man and beast/animal

We were talking about the use of imagery, and you'll notice that the question of man and the beast/man and the animal is a constant sub-theme in the book of Daniel.

In chapter 4, under the discipline of God, Nebuchadnezzar lapses into living like an animal.

In chapter 6 you have those sophisticated politicians who were all for the rule of law, if you please! Then Daniel was cast into the pit with the lions, and got out. The other civil servants were thrown in, and didn't get out. More of that later.

In chapter 7 the first animal representing Babylon was a lion with eagles' wings (v. 4). His wings were clipped, he stood up on his hind legs, and he was given a mind like a man. He became positively humanized: man and animal. The fourth beast was also given certain human characteristics: 'eyes like the eyes of a man, and a mouth speaking great things' (v. 8).

Imagine human intelligence linked with animal instinct. That combination was lethal. Alas, he didn't get the heart of a man.

In chapter 8 Daniel has another vision involving animals.

So you can see that this is a theme; a series of chapters dealing with the question of man and the animal, showing the same kind of *pattern*.

Nebuchadnezzar—chapter 4

If you start with Nebuchadnezzar, what a vivid discipline that was. It wasn't arbitrary on God's part. You see, there's a difference between man and the animal, even in such lowly matters as food. Give your nice respectable old Fido a bone or a beefsteak and he won't mind how he eats it. He'll go out into the driveway and eat it all covered with dust and mud, and I won't mention all the behaviour patterns he exhibits in this process, for Fido is an animal, isn't he?

Would you eat your food like that? Next time you're invited out to dinner, watch your hostess. She's got a beautiful table and placemats or a cloth, and the spoons have to be put this way, the forks here and the knives somewhere else. The colour of the carrots has got to stand in contrast to the green of the beans, and the potatoes aren't all mixed up with the mushrooms and things. These are all nicely arranged.

There's a difference between animals and food and humans and food, because even in food it's not just for the satisfaction of our stomachs. There's the aesthetic side to food, and they say that it does the old juices in the stomach a tremendous lot of good to see the food nicely presented. And sometimes your hostess is so super-duper that there will be some beautiful classical music to get you over the soup. Beautiful, yes; and it was God who gave us the ability as humans to impose order on creation.

The Genesis story is very interesting. When God made man to till the ground, he started him off with a beautiful exhibition of what could be done with earth. 'And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed' (Gen 2:8). This shows that the whole earth wasn't garden. It was God's way of saying, 'There you are, Adam, you could make something of earth. Look what can be done when you impose order and discipline on it.'

What a garden Nebuchadnezzar's was, as distinct from just a wild forest. It's that human thing that expresses itself in order and beauty, whether it's in literature, music, food, or architecture. But when Nebuchadnezzar forgot God, his culture went bad, and he lost his sense of order and beauty.

Dogs may be nice obedient creatures, but they have no sense of art. And you'll notice that, when it comes to food, they don't have any sense of morals. They'll come begging and licking you, and pretending to be friends until you give them a bone. But try and take it away from them! If another dog has a bigger bone, when he isn't looking the first one will take his as well. No sense of morality.

Poor old Nebuchadnezzar, that fine beautiful aesthete, now living like an animal, half naked, brutalized.

Ladies and gentlemen, what has public television come to in our modern age, when sheer debauchery, filth and violence are offered under the name of art, and disorder in music,

literature and poetry is thought to be the wonderful thing? We ought, like our God, to have concern for people's cultural health. If we have anything to do with maintaining standards of intellect and beauty, truth and morality, not only in science but in the realm of literature, we could do well to study what God has to say about Nebuchadnezzar. When he lost his sense of God, his culture went to disaster, and he became an animal. He was recovered, and found the true God. He stretched out his hand in all the bewilderment of his animal experience, and found a God who restored him to his majesty and brightness.

These are not just stories to play crossword puzzles with, make structures and so on. We have to expound the detail and take all the detail seriously. In this first occasion, the imagery of man and the animal is exceedingly evident.

Daniel's first vision—chapter 7

So it is also when we come to chapter 7. Its opposite is chapter 2, where Gentile government is pictured as a beautiful and magnificent man. Chapter 7 puts the other side: man and the beast once more. As I said earlier, the first beast became more humane. His wings were clipped, and he walked on his back legs like a man. That is God being very kind. It may be talking about Nebuchadnezzar's personal experience, but it's true in general. Over the course of history, governments have become more humane.

I can remember the days in my home town where children ran about without shoes, with only a vest on them; where people couldn't afford doctors and died in agony and filth. Since the war, the government has become very much more humane, and people are cared for. That is good, isn't it? If you'd come to Britain in the early 1830s and dared, in your hunger, to steal a sheep, we'd probably have hanged you. We shouldn't do that today. Do you approve of that, or would you rather that we hang you?

Is that humanizing of government, so it's no longer as barbarous, the key to man's progress? Will it bring in an age of wonderful peace? No, it won't. Why not? Well, look at the fourth beast (vv. 7–8). It was an animal, but it had the eyes of a human being, that is, the intelligence and insight of a human, and the mouth of a human. It didn't have the heart of a human, and the mixture was lethal.

Can you imagine a lion or a rhinoceros or a dinosaur that not only has colossal strength, but also understands about atoms and how to make hydrogen bombs? But it hasn't got the heart of a man, so now you'd be in trouble. With this lethal mixture of human insight and animal nature, this fourth beast became such a destructive force in the earth—what C. S. Lewis would have called 'that hideous strength'—that in the end God had to destroy it to save humanity. In the place of that uncivilized kind of thing, God substituted the kingdom of the ideal man, our blessed Lord himself.

One can't help remembering when the Lord was here on earth, what they did to him. What beasts Herod and the Sanhedrin and Pilate were. They tore him until he was scarcely recognizable as human. It wasn't their whips that were so bad, for even Pilate 'knew that it was out of envy that they had delivered him up' (Matt 27:18). Thank God for that superb man; he's the one destined by God to rule.

Daniel and the lions' den—chapter 6

Chapter 6 is another animal story. It's nice to talk about the rule of law, but did you ever hear of monkeys making laws? They have inherent laws, apparently—societies and pecking orders. Their rules and regulations make for a very interesting study. Who controls the troop and the groups, and so on? Who's boss, and who's second, and all this kind of thing. They do have their patterns, but they've never written them down anywhere. As far as we know, they don't philosophize. Monkeys do what monkeys have always done; they make no progress in politics.

It's the marvel of human beings that we can theorize about the law and have written constitutions. The rule of law is marvellous. It will curb hot temper and arbitrariness, won't it? Well, here are some civil servants, experts in theorizing the law, but at their heart there's sheer animal jealousy and envy, and they use the law to get Daniel put among the animals.

Just here your faith is going to be stretched. Animals go by instinct, rather than law, and when they see a fine Daniel coming down for their dinner, what is there to restrain them? Do you believe there's a power that could and did subdue animal nature so that they didn't gobble him up? If you do, then you've got a gospel message that you could preach to the world. Is there a power anywhere in our universe that can subdue the animal inside us—not only the ugly base animal, but the higher instincts of envy and jealousy? Do you believe in such a law?

You say, 'Of course we do, we've preached it thousands of times.'

Jolly good, carry on! It's worth saying, because, if there's ever a hope of a paradise and a millennial kingdom, there'd better be a law that can subdue the animal, or else the whole idea of heaven is a myth. In our Christian churches too, we ought to exhibit the fact, so that we don't tear one another to pieces (Gal 5:15).

We do believe that there is a law that can subdue the animal. God prevailed upon the lions, not to cease being lions but to obey his superior law, and they didn't touch Daniel. Being found out by the king, the politicians were thrown to the lions. They didn't believe there was any law above their own that could subdue lions—and neither did the lions! The angel that had kept them in place when Daniel was there happened to be somewhere else, and that was the end of the politicians.

And so you have a whole array of stories about man and animals/beasts. They are not just ditto repeat; the imagery is deliberate and it's a very important part of the message. God doesn't write just little comic strips, you know, with grotesque illustrations. The imagery is part of the message. This recurring thing of man and animal is what I would call *pattern*. But, genuine pattern though it is, I don't think the theme of man and animal is the key to the *structure*.

An illustration of the difference between structure and pattern

If ever you came to my house in Belfast, you'd open the front door and find yourself in a small entrance hall with doors leading off. Leave the doors shut, and you would be in an entrance hall, structurally separate from the rest. The walls of the hall are panelled wood and it has a patterned carpet. That's the *pattern*.

If you open the door straight in front of you, that would lead you into the dining room. Structurally, the dining room is separate. You wouldn't confuse the hall with the dining room because of the structure, the walls and the divisions. But when you open the door, you would find that the dining room is panelled as well; the pattern on the wall goes right round the dining room. So the hall and the dining room share the same pattern, but not the same *structure*.

Somebody in the kindness of their heart gave me a series of pictures, thirteen of them, all upon a theme. I hung two of them in the hall and the rest around the dining room. So, when you open the front door, there is a pattern of pictures going right through the hall and into the dining room. But the pictures don't determine the structure, do they? Then, if you looked at the pattern of the carpet in the hall, and the pattern of the carpet in the dining room, you would find they are two different patterns. Patterns don't determine structure.

An example of pattern from John's Gospel

In the Bible, sometimes one story can belong to several different patterns. In the Gospel of John there are a number of signs, and the first of those signs is the story of the wedding in Cana of Galilee. It's unusual for the fact that the bride isn't even described, nor her dress, nor what she went away in.

It's the first of the signs, and it is in the same series as the other signs; they form a pattern in the book. We're told that the mother of Jesus was there (2:1), and you will notice that, quite apart from miracles, there are a number of other stories peculiar to John, in which women are prominent.

- Chapter 2: the wedding with the mother of Jesus there.
- Chapter 4: the story of the Samaritan woman.
- Chapter 8: a woman taken in adultery.
- Chapters 11–12: Mary and Martha at the death of their brother.
- Chapter 19: Mary is standing at the foot of the cross and our Lord says to her, 'Behold, your son!'; and to John, 'Behold, your mother!' (vv. 26–27).
- Chapter 20: the story of Mary Magdalene in the garden, and only John has this bit. Our Lord says to her, 'Don't hold on to me, Mary. I've not yet ascended to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (see v. 17).

The theme of relationship

Six stories about women that are peculiar to John. They form a beautiful pattern, and it is significant because the theme running through the pattern is *relationship*.

Chapter 2: At that wedding, our Lord said to his mother, 'Woman, what does this have to do with me?' (2:4). What are weddings, if they're not the public formation of a new relationship?

Chapter 4: What was wrong with the woman in Samaria? Well, among other things, she was living with a man who wasn't her husband. The relationship was not true.

Chapter 8: Obviously the relationship was very bad. The woman had committed adultery; she was unfaithful to relationships.

Chapter 11: Martha and Mary, and the relationship broken by the death of their brother.

Chapter 19: Mary, the mother of the Lord, at the death of her son. Mary wasn't John's physical mother, nor he her physical son, so a new relation was formed.

Chapter 20: Mary Magdalene in the garden: 'Go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"' (v. 17). New relationships.

As you will see, these six stories are very unevenly distributed throughout the book. They form a pattern, but they don't form the structure of the book.

An example of structure from John's Gospel

The book itself is structured around certain visits that our Lord Jesus made from Galilee up north to Jerusalem, and back again. That is its basic, geographical structure. His purpose was to visit Jerusalem at the times of the festivals, to take part in the national worship and service of God.

The first journey occupies two chapters, from 2:13 right through until our Lord gets back to Galilee at the end of chapter 4. How do you suppose chapter 5 begins? Well, a journey to Jerusalem, and back again in Galilee at the end of chapter 6. That's the second journey finished. In chapter 7 he goes again to Jerusalem, and back again at 10:40. The fourth journey begins at 11:55 and he doesn't return to Galilee until after his resurrection, chapter 21.

So, the Gospel of John is the story about four journeys that our blessed Lord made to Jerusalem and back again. That is its basic structure, but within the structure there are patterns. The story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee is the first member in the pattern of these stories about women.

The Bible is like a magnificent tapestry. If you've studied tapestries, you look at a feature here, and you'll see a whole pattern going along a row through the tapestry in one direction. If you start at the same point and look the other way, you'll see it's part of another pattern. Ladies are magnificently clever when they make tapestries. If you won't mind my saying it, so is God when he writes. God's word is simple, but it's much more complicated than we sometimes think. It is inspired by the God who made the universe, and the atom.

Structure in Daniel

We were talking about pattern in Daniel, and I've given you this from John's Gospel as an example of what I mean. I don't know whether it helps you very much. The pattern in Daniel of man and the beast is to be taken seriously; it goes right through the book. As a group they have the same common element, but they have different messages. However, they do not control structure.

Come back to this sheet that I gave out and you'll see certain other little details that, to my mind, determine structure. The first five come to that great climax at the end of the Babylonian Empire. If you are studying narrative in literature, you will naturally look at where a story starts and where the climax comes. Sometimes there are minor climaxes, and then there are major ones. Stories in the Bible are similar.

The theme of the golden vessels begins in chapter one and comes down to its climax in chapter five with Belshazzar drinking from them, which brings divine judgment on Belshazzar and marks the end of the Babylonian Empire. This arrogant king committed the ultimate blasphemy and desecration when he used vessels that were there for the sole glory of God and drank from them himself, putting his own pleasure as the ultimate thing for which he lived. That spelt the end of Babylon.

But if you look across to chapters 10–12, what are they describing? It's when the end will come, and this time not just the end of Babylon, but the end of all Gentile rule. You'll have to distinguish the terms carefully. There is a time when the end will come; but then there's another phrase used that means a special period at the end of human history called 'the time of the end' (12:4, 9). Daniel enquires how long that time of the end will last, and he's given the figures.

How will the end come? Well, as you know from your reading of Daniel 11 it will come when the wilful king shall arise: 'And the king shall do as he wills. He shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods' (v. 36). That's when the end will come, and that will be *the end*.

Although it is history, do you see how chapter 5 carries prophetic overtones? This is the end of Babylon. According to Daniel, Babylon met its end in this arrogant king who usurped the service that was due to God, and brought it to himself. He was but a pale foreshadowing of the wilful king who will be the last in the succession of Gentile powers. Mention of him is made in 2 Thessalonians 2:

Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. (vv. 3–4 KJV)

Thought-flow in Daniel

In the second two paragraphs on the left of the sheet, I have suggested some thought-flow — some *leitmotifs*⁴, as people would call them in literature — a recurring theme that runs through these two sets of chapters. In the first five, I suggested that one of the *leitmotifs* is the question of *value*. Watch how that is got across.

Values

In chapter 1 we have the golden vessels of divine service. Why gold? Because the Israelites had made them of gold to express their evaluation of God as their supreme value. They weren't of tin, they were of gold; dedicated and sanctified solely to the service of God. They were expressions of value. The Gentile empires are described in this series, not as wild beasts but as successions of valuable metals, indicating that these were different kinds of government. None of them was of absolute value. They each had different strengths and different weaknesses. We need to notice that. Different generations so very often think that their form of government is the ultimate. Nowadays people have got it into their heads that

⁴ German = leading motives.

democracy is the ultimate, as though it were an absolute value. Daniel's image is telling us that no form of government is of absolute value; all forms of government come and go and you don't have the same thing remaining.

Chapter 2 is telling us that governments change. Marx was quite wrong, however, when he said that it was the very change that would bring in the utopia. By thesis, counter thesis, and then synthesis, the very process of change is an inevitable, irresistible law of history. It would come from peasantry or serfdom, eventually through democracy to the rule of the party, and then to complete communism, and that would be utopia. It would be the irresistible laws of change in history that would bring in the utopia.

But Daniel 2 was already saying, 'No, it won't. You'll get the change, but the change itself won't bring in the utopia. The whole lot will have to be destroyed.' It isn't difficult to see who was right, Daniel or Marx.

In chapter 3 we read how Nebuchadnezzar tried to stop the change and exalt his government to an absolute value. He made an image and called upon men to worship it and give to his system of government that loyalty that should only be given to God himself. Many a totalitarian regime has tried to exalt its form of government to an absolute value that requires absolute devotion. The state must be worshipped as the final absolute value.

This is serious politics, you know. Thousands of our fellow brothers and sisters in Eastern Europe have died for it. Thousands of our fellow Christians under the Roman Empire died for the same thing in order to make the Roman Empire stable after periods of civil war and oceans of bloodshed. They invented the notion of the worship of the emperor to bring stability to the government. They didn't mind what other gods you worshipped, but you had to be prepared to worship the state in the form of the emperor, and it brought about peace throughout his multi-ethnic empire.

Nebuchadnezzar was after the same thing: to stop change, and thus to invest his form of government with absolute value. The three Jewish men said, 'Not on your life. We're prepared to obey you in all we can, but your government is not the absolute value in the universe. God is, and there is a devotion that must be given to God alone. If that upsets your state and your political system, Nebuchadnezzar, it will have to.'

It's rather a different issue at stake from the values in chapter 6. Chapters 4 and 5 are obviously concerned with values. When the hand came out to write upon the wall and issue God's evaluation of Belshazzar, it wrote a curious thing, 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, and PARSIN' (5:25). Belshazzar couldn't read it. Why he couldn't is a mystery, because these words would have been stamped on the bits of metal, gold and whatnot that were the equivalent of their coinage. They didn't have coinage at the time; they weighed out valuable metal, and it was stamped with weights which then came to denote the value of the piece.

'Mene, mene, tekel, and parsin,'—a mina, a mina, a shekel and two halves of a shekel—was written on the wall. What was that about and why couldn't Belshazzar read it?

Well, what would you think if you got home tonight, sat your wearied limbs down upon your sofa, and a hand appeared and wrote upon the wall, 'Dollars and cents, pounds and shillings, marks and pfennigs'? What on earth would you make of it?

You'd say, 'Is this God talking to me about money? Why would he write stock exchange figures on my wall?'

What is money? Is money *value*? No, money is our reckoning of value. Give a child a dollar and he'll buy the biggest ice cream he can set his eyes on. Give a businessman a dollar, and he'll put it with two hundred others and buy a golf club. It depends on your values, doesn't it? Is there an ultimate value? What's a human being worth, and where does his or her value derive from?

Oh, what wonderful stories these are. Belshazzar had come to his own evaluation. He was the chief valuer in the universe, and God's vessels were not worth much to him. The chief thing to live for and the chief value in life was Belshazzar himself and his pleasure. When he made his decision God wrote his valuation, and the scales were set. In those days, as I've said, you counted money by weighing it, and God weighed Belshazzar. Without God, what is a human being worth? When I was a youth, the chemicals that composed him were worth three shillings and six pence in English money, which wasn't much. Without God, it still isn't much, even in dollars.

I suggest to you therefore, that the first five chapters deal with values. The second five deal with questions of law and truth, and time. If you care to take the notes home and you have five minutes to look at them, you might consider what I could possibly mean by those suggestions, and trace them through. The *leitmotifs* going through the second five do not just repeat the motifs of the first lot. They're concerned with rather different things, both being necessary. So let's cease there and, God willing, we shall continue with this tomorrow.

The History of the book of Daniel and Some of Its Characters

In our studies together yesterday we were making the point that, whereas it is very profitable in any book to consider its structure and then any patterns that emerge in the course of the text, our first and last job is to expound all the detail in each passage. When studying structures, the temptation is to take one or two elements out of a story, compare those with one or two elements in another story, and leave it there as though, somehow the fact that there are similarities, that is the message. But, of course, if we should fall into that trap, it leads us to neglect all the other details in the story and that would be a failure in our duty as expositors.

I want to come back to that notion today in our first session, and study in particular the eighth chapter of the book of Daniel. But first, let's look at what we've found so far.

A familiar pattern

1. Similarities

In the first five chapters, there is one introductory chapter (ch. 1); and then there are two stories of *images*: Nebuchadnezzar's dream image (ch. 2); Nebuchadnezzar's golden image (ch. 3). Then there are two stories of *kings*: Nebuchadnezzar, who was cut down and restored (ch. 4); Belshazzar, who, having been warned and defying that warning, was cut down without further mercy (ch. 5).

We noticed how there were common themes in each of those two pairs, though, of course, there are very big differences between the story in chapter 2 and the story in chapter 3. We noticed also that chapters 4 and 5 are explicitly connected by the storyteller, when Belshazzar is reminded of the events of chapter 4.

We have the same pattern emerging in the second half of the book. There is an introductory chapter (ch. 6); and then there are two stories about *beasts* (chs. 7–8). Then there are two chapters which have in common the theme of the *writings*: the writings of Jeremiah (ch. 9) and the writing of truth (chs. 10–12).

2. Differences

Having observed that there are similarities, our next, and more important, task was to ask what the differences are. It is most unlikely that two stories, being similar, should be a question of ditto repeato, just saying the same thing all over again. Of course, if they do, we've no cause for complaint. God is allowed to repeat himself if he wants to. While the stories are

similar and basically deal with the same theme, normally it is the differences that become significant and show us how they are presenting different sides of that theme.

If we apply that principle to chapters 7 and 8, our task in 8 will be to enquire why it was necessary to have two visions regarding beasts. Why wasn't one enough? What is chapter 8 saying that chapter 7 isn't? So that's the task we give ourselves to this morning, and I shall presently argue that the way to settle the matter is, having noticed the similarity, then to forget it and concentrate on the detailed exposition of the story in chapter 8.

Different interpretations of the book of Daniel

I cannot do that without remembering that chapters 7 and 8 are a 'storm centre' in the exposition of the book. Along perhaps with chapter 11, these are the embattled chapters in the controversy between the conservative and liberal interpretations.

The conservative view is that it was written in the sixth century BC by Daniel, a high-ranking Jew in the civil service, first of Babylon and then of Medo-Persia. The liberal view is that it was written in the second century BC, somewhere about 167–164. The issue at stake is not merely exposition from a literary, historical, or theological point of view; it is also an issue between rationalism on the one side, and faith in the possibility of miracle on the other.

Chapter 7, as we know, describes the succession of Gentile world empires, and this raises the first difference.

The conservative viewpoint is that the four beasts in the vision represent the following empires: 1. Babylon; 2. Medo-Persia; 3. Greece; 4. Rome. The liberal interpretation would be different: 1. Babylon; 2. Media; 3. Persia; 4. Greece. You'll notice the very important difference. The conservative view takes it to be prophesying not merely the end of Babylon, and then the rise of Medo-Persia, and after that the rise of Alexander and his successors; but also the rise and eventual fall of the Roman Empire. The liberal point of view is that the prophecy of chapter 7 does not prophesy the rise of Rome; it goes only as far as the rise of Alexander the Great and his successors, the Greek Empires.

The liberal view of the book of Daniel

Then come the other large considerations. The liberal view holds that the book wasn't a prophecy at all, except for one tiny bit at the end which the writer had a go at and got wrong. You're liable to do that if you're not used to writing prophecy, and you make it up out of your own head!

The book, they say, was not written in the sixth century BC. It was written somewhere about 167–164 BC, towards the end of the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes. You will remember that the Greek Empire began with the meteoric rise of Alexander the Great. He defeated the Persians, took over their kingdoms, and spread his empire far beyond Persia, down to the northern parts of India. He died as a very young man as a result of his hard, arduous campaigns, and his dissolute behaviour. In his place there rose up four of his army generals, known as the *Diádokhoi*, or the 'successors'. Two of those became more prominent than the others: Ptolemy in the south in Egypt, and Seleucus in the north in Syria. They are called the Ptolemaic and the Seleucid Empires therefore.

Out of the Seleucid division of the empire there eventually arose a monarch by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes. Some Jews called him Antiochus Epimanes, which sounds the same, but means something rather different. Epiphanes is the name you would give to the 'God Manifest', Epimanes means 'the Mad'.⁵ For reasons we needn't pause to discuss, he became a notorious persecutor and oppressor of the Jews, and it is eventually upon him that chapter 8 will concentrate.

The liberal theory is that, between 167–164 BC—perhaps towards the end of that three-year period, when Antiochus was persecuting the Jews with all his fury—some unknown person wrote the book of Daniel, using sundry sources that might have been available to him and adding prophecies that weren't genuine. His desire was good; he aimed to comfort the Jews and strengthen their faith, so that they might resist the persecution. By the middle 160s, Babylon, Media, Persia, and a good deal of the Greek Empire had long since gone, but he cast that whole block of history as though it were prophecy. As it had already taken place, you could be sure that if you talked of it as *prophecy*, the prophecy would come true.

It was an ingenious notion. People would know the prophecy had come true, and say to themselves that if all that big chunk of prophecy has actually come true, then the rest of it would come true as well. But the last little bit was the writer's effort to engage himself in genuine prophecy. If you're a novice and making it up out of your own head, you're very liable to get it wrong. Instead of writing history as though it were prophecy, he attempted to really forecast the future. Poor man, he got his bit wrong. He prophesied that Antiochus would come to his end in such and such a fashion, and it didn't happen. His prophecies didn't come true; the little bit that he prophesied actually turned out quite differently.

'Never mind,' says the liberal theory. 'Even though it didn't come true, the Jews were tremendously encouraged by it, and their faith was strengthened.' Within a comparatively short time they canonized the book and that view is still held by men of massive intellect. In the academic world I suppose it is by far the majority theory.

It strengthens itself by observing that the long and detailed prophecy in chapter 11 is different from much other prophecy in Scripture. It doesn't merely forecast the future in general terms, but prophesies in detail the events that would take place between the Ptolemies in the south and the Seleucids in the north over many, many decades. The liberal view says it's impossible to believe that this is a genuine prophecy, because there's nothing like it elsewhere in the Bible. God doesn't normally prophesy in such tiny detail, and this surely is another bit of evidence that this isn't a genuine prophecy. It is *vaticinium ex eventu*, prophecy written after the event. It is really a record of past history presented as though it were prophecy.

The conservative view of the book of Daniel

These are genuine prophecies written in the sixth century BC, not the second. When the first prophecies were made, Babylon was already in existence and then it fell to Persia. Nevertheless, the prophecies were genuine and they came true. They covered not only the rise

⁵ Antiochus IV Epiphanes . . . (born c. 215 BC—died 164, Tabae, Iran), Seleucid king of the Hellenistic Syrian kingdom who reigned from 175 to 164 BC. As a ruler he was best known for his encouragement of Greek culture and institutions. His attempts to suppress Judaism brought on the Wars of the Maccabees. (britannica.com)

and fall of Medo-Persia, but the rise and fall of Greece, and on to the rise of Rome and its eventual fall. That is a very interesting point. Even if the book were written in 167–164 BC, if the fourth beast of chapter 7 was intended as a prophecy of Rome, at least that is a genuine bit of prophecy in the book.

The liberal view doesn't believe in the possibility of genuine prophecy like that. It will argue that the fourth beast isn't Rome; the fourth beast is Greece, and in particular Antiochus Epiphanes, so it isn't prophecy at all. The identity of the fourth beast, therefore, is a very major argument in the interpretation of the book of Daniel. If you look at the commentaries written by conservatives, you will find that they sometimes spend many pages arguing about the fourth beast.

Chapter 7 has four beasts. The fourth beast is different from the previous beasts. It has ten horns; another one rises up and three of the first horns are taken away. This one little horn becomes the terrible antichrist, the persecutor of the people of God and a rebel against almighty God himself. 'He shall speak words against the Most High, and shall wear out the saints of the Most High' (v. 25).

Chapter 8 has two beasts. The first is a ram with two horns (the kings of Media and Persia, v. 20), and the second is a male goat with one horn (the king of Greece, v. 21). The second beast starts off having one horn and it represents Alexander the Great. That is cut off, and four come in its place; and then out of one comes this special horn. He is the great persecutor of the people of God, rebelling against almighty God himself. 'He shall . . . destroy mighty men and the people who are the saints. . . . And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes . . .' (vv. 24–25).

The question of whether these two are the same comes to be at the centre of the argument, because, on the conservative view, the little horn in chapter 7 comes out of the Roman Empire. But the conservatives have to face the fact that it is explicitly said by the prophet himself that this one horn shall arise out of Greece (8:21). Therefore, the conservative commentaries spend much time arguing that this horn is different, and you can see why they spend so much time on it.

What is the message of these chapters?

I am not going to pursue the argument any further. I'm just sketching in the background, and stirring up your pure minds by way of remembrance, and perhaps of frustration! A lot of conservative commentaries have spent an enormous amount of energy on technical questions like that. Could it be, sometimes, to the neglect of what the chapters are actually saying? So we are going to try and come back to the book as a piece of literature, and ask ourselves some questions:

- Why does it have two chapters on beasts?
- What is one chapter saying that the other chapter isn't saying?
- Why are there four beasts in chapter 7, but only two in chapter 8?
- If the two beasts are already represented by some of the four beasts, why the repetition?

We are looking for the differences between the two and —this is the important bit— we're looking for what the text itself is positively saying. What message is it conveying through its

symbolism? And what is the message in chapter 7 that the message of chapter 8 is not saying in quite the same way?

Daniel 7

One of the big and significant differences is that in chapter 7 these empires are represented by four successive beasts and horns and things. But then the messianic kingdom which shall supplant them is described at great length.

As I looked, thrones were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames; its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came out from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgement, and the books were opened. . . . I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. . . . So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. 'These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever.' (7:9–10, 13–14, 16–18)

Chapter 7 gives a great deal of space and time to the description of the messianic kingdom and its king, the Son of Man, and his faithful adherents, the saints of the Most High.

Daniel 8

When you come to chapter 8, there is almost no description of the messianic kingdom.

By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand. (v. 25)

All it says is that when antichrist stands up against the Prince of princes, he shall be broken without a human hand; that is, by the intervention of supernatural power. But there's no description of the Prince of princes, nor of the nature of his kingdom. It is a very different vision, then, not only from the four beasts in chapter 7, but from the vision in chapter 2, where the successive empires are represented by the metals of the image. There the image is destroyed by the Messiah and his kingdom, represented as a rock cut out of the mountain without hands, which smashes the image and itself grows into a great mountain.

In chapter 7, after the successive empires, the messianic kingdom is described in detail and marvellous glory. Not in chapter 8. Beyond the mere fact that the antichrist shall be destroyed, there is no description of the messianic kingdom, and no detailed description of the Messiah either. Why is that?

If you were preaching a series on Daniel, perhaps you'd assign Wednesday night to chapter 7; and then the next night, when you've got to chapter 8, perhaps you'd say, 'As we know from chapter 7, the antichrist is going to be destroyed . . .' and you'd give a wonderful description of the messianic kingdom. But if you did that, you wouldn't be expounding Daniel, would you? By bringing in something that Daniel 8 doesn't bring in, you might be blurring the topic a bit.

Why is there no messianic kingdom in chapter 8? What is chapter 8 about? Let's come to the chapter and its detail. The vision occurred in the third year of the reign of King Belshazzar.

I raised my eyes and saw, and behold, a ram standing on the bank of the canal. It had two horns, and both horns were high, but one was higher than the other, and the higher one came up last. I saw the ram charging westwards and northwards and southwards. *No beast could stand before him, and there was no one who could rescue from his power.* He did as he pleased and became great. (Dan 8:3-4).

That empire, which we know to be Medo-Persia, reached almost absolute power. 'There was no one who could rescue from his power'. His power was so absolute, that he did just what he liked. Here's the description of the Medo-Persian Empire:

As I was considering, behold, a male goat came from the west across the face of the whole earth, without touching the ground. And the goat had a conspicuous horn between his eyes. He came to the ram with the two horns, which I had seen standing on the bank of the canal, and he ran at him in his powerful wrath. I saw him come close to the ram, and he was enraged against him and struck the ram and broke his two horns. *And the ram had no power to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled on him. And there was no one who could rescue the ram from his power.* (vv. 5-7)

Did you note the recurring theme? The Medo-Persian empire was strong and, in its own context, almost absolute in its power. But there arose another empire, even more powerful than Medo-Persia: the empire of Alexander the Great. It was colossal in its spread, vastly bigger than Medo-Persia, but also marked by a greater power. Alexander's technique of training his army was a new and novel thing, and it proved its immense efficiency by bashing the old ram amidstships, knocking it to pieces, and putting itself in its place. For the time being, it had a power that was almost absolute. What happens when some empire, and particularly its head and ruler, achieves almost absolute power?

The story hurriedly moves on some generations down the Seleucid branch. Alexander died early, and his place was taken by four of his generals. Two of them became more prominent than the other two: the Seleucids in the north and the Ptolemies in the south. Out of the Seleucid branch, there eventually arose a monarch, known in history by his name, Antiochus Epiphanes. That Seleucid Empire possessed virtually absolute power as far as the Jews were concerned, for the time being. What did it do under the leadership of Antiochus? Read it in the terms of chapter 8:

It grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them. It became great, even as great as the Prince of the host. And the regular burnt offering was taken away from him, and the place of his sanctuary was overthrown. And a host will be given over to it together with the regular burnt offering because of transgression, and *it will throw truth to the ground*, and it will act and prosper. (vv. 10–12)

Power in relation to truth

In anticipation of what we shall be discussing, I call your attention to the phrase, ‘it will throw truth to the ground.’ Here we have a very interesting topic, raised by the chapter itself: the question of absolute, or almost absolute, power, and its relation to truth.

I am possessed of a butterfly mind, so I’m going to skip all kinds of levels and dance off to another flower completely, in a different part of Scripture. I’m going to suggest to you that this question of power and truth, and the relationship between the two, is not some little detail fit only for a brief discussion over the muffins and cream at teatime. This is *the* problem that arrives at the heart of the human condition. It has in time past emerged as the issue at stake in power politics, and will emerge again at the end of the age at its supreme level.

Pilate

It arose at that unique juncture in history when the Messiah himself, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, stood before Pilate. His fellow Jews had handed him over to Pilate as a political subversive claiming to be king. Pilate said to him, ‘Are you a king, then?’ And Christ replied, ‘Yes, in a sense, I am a king; but to this end I was born and for this purpose I came into the world, *that I should bear witness to the truth*. You see, Pilate, my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom had been of this world, then my disciples would have fought to save me from being arrested and handed over to you’ (see John 18:33–37).

Hard-boiled military commander, governor of the province, and politician, Pilate said, ‘What is truth?’ (v. 38). I wonder how you would answer that. What on earth has truth got to do with politics, and power politics? As the conversation developed and our Lord remained silent in the face of many of his questions, Pilate got a little bit exasperated.

‘Look here, young man,’ said he, ‘you must talk. I’m in a difficult position. It’s all right for you with your notions about a kingdom of truth, but the actualities of life are, *I have the power* to crucify you, and I have the power to release you. You’d better talk’ (see 19:10).

What is truth?

If I am not mistaken, this is the tremendous issue that chapter 8 of Daniel is bringing before us, and I trust you will perceive that it’s not some slight matter. In the days before the coming of Messiah in power and great glory, this will become perhaps the chief issue in the world. What is the truth? Who has absolute power? Where does power come from? Is there an almighty God to whom all else is subject, or does power lie ultimately with the nation that’s got the biggest Star Wars programme, the biggest military might, the biggest rockets, and with whoever is the head of that power bloc at the time?

According to Daniel 8, when this dictator got almost absolute power into his hands he proceeded to persecute the Jews. He had his political reasons for doing it, but he did what none of the other preceding Gentile emperors had done.

At this point we should notice again the difference between the first half of Daniel and the second half. This is the story that began in chapter 1, when Nebuchadnezzar took the vessels out of the house of the Lord in Jerusalem and put them reverently enough in his pagan temple. It ends with the last ruler in Babylon, Belshazzar, committing that tremendous sacrilege. He took these vessels of God out of the temple, brought them to his dinner table, and drank from them himself, thus saying that the final value in life was himself and his personal pleasure.

Nebuchadnezzar eventually destroyed the temple at Jerusalem, but neither he nor Belshazzar attempted to ban the worship of Jehovah. The Jews in Babylon were free to get on with their own religion and their worship of Jehovah. In fact, they eventually became a very prosperous people and had an exceedingly important centre of Jewish learning in a place called Pumbedita.⁶ The synagogue and the *Exilarch* (head of the Jews in exile) at Babylon became second only to the chief rabbi in Jerusalem, right up to the time of our Lord.

Incidentally, it is possible that Peter was writing from literal Babylon (1 Pet 5:13). When he was persecuted and escaped from prison in Jerusalem it is altogether a possibility that he went to Pumbedita, that other great centre of Jewish learning and biblical exposition. Peace be to the commentators who think differently, of course!

But to come back on track, the Babylonians never tried to ban the worship of Jehovah, in spite of what Nebuchadnezzar did in chapter 3. Please notice that carefully. It was not an attempt to ban the worship of Jehovah, but a demand that the Jews should worship Nebuchadnezzar's image and gods like everybody else did. As Christians, we may find this a little difficult. Pagan idolaters don't mind how many gods you worship; as many as you like or none at all. But pagan emperors were inclined to say, 'My god must be among whatever other gods you worship. You must worship the god of the state, and then you can worship as many other gods as you like.' They thought that was very reasonable, and couldn't understand how anybody would be so bigoted as not to reverence other people's gods.

I mean, you may choose to go to Sears and you don't go to Eaton's.⁷ Sears to you is better; but you don't lambast the woman next door who prefers to go to Eaton's, do you? You're liberally minded about it.

The Pagans took that view of religion. That was what Nebuchadnezzar was saying. You can get on worshipping Jehovah, but you'll also have to worship and bow down to the god of the state. Under the Roman Empire that's what the Romans said to our first brothers and sisters in Christ. 'You can carry on worshipping Jesus Christ if you want to. We regard it as a strange religion, but for the time being you can get on with it, as long as you also worship the emperor. If you don't, we shall throw you to the lions.' When the Christians became known as people who would not worship the emperor, they got eliminated on those grounds. Lots of other people were quite happy to worship the emperor along with all the rest of the gods. That is Paganism.

⁶ Aramaic, meaning 'The Mouth of the River'. It was the name of a city in ancient Babylonia close to the modern-day city of Fallujah, in Anbar Province, Iraq.

⁷ Two Canadian retail chain stores; all branches now closed.

According to their great commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me' (Exod 20:3), the Jews wouldn't bow down and worship the emperor's god, but Nebuchadnezzar did not ban the Jewish religion. In the second half of the book of Daniel, Darius's civil servants persuaded him to ban praying to any god, Jewish or otherwise. For a limited period, you could pray only to the emperor. That was the first little rift, the first cloud in the coming storm.

The persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes

The heavens grew black under Antiochus. He was the man in history who banned the Jewish religion. He exalted himself above God himself, and set up 'the abomination that makes desolate' (see Dan 12:11). Not in his own backyard but in the temple at Jerusalem, if you please. He banned the worship of Jehovah and substituted the worship of some other god, Baal-Shemaim, I suspect, 'lord of heaven'. We know from the books of Maccabees that he banned circumcision. Any Jewish woman found having circumcised her baby was taken, along with the baby, and thrown over the walls of the city. He banned the possession of Scripture and enforced the worship of Baal-Shemaim. He offered a pig on the altar in the temple. In all probability, though this might be an excess of the Maccabean historian, he installed religious prostitutes in the temple of God in Jerusalem in the pagan manner. That was a very significant event. Nothing like it had happened before. That's the first thing to grasp. No wonder Daniel spends a whole chapter talking about it.

With such a persecution breaking over their heads, it is the sad fact of history—though Daniel refers to it perhaps in coded language—that the high priests of Israel's religion at the time connived with Antiochus Epiphanes and became joint persecutors of the faithful in Israel who wouldn't bow down to Antiochus Epiphanes. Some of the high priests would have argued, 'What does it matter what you call God? Call him Jehovah like we used to, or Baal like the Syrians do, or Zeus like the Greeks. It's all one and the same thing, what are you making a fuss about? The Gentiles have some truth, so why should we be so bigoted, holding on to the Old Testament and that kind of thing?' So the religious leaders of the nation in the form of the high priests connived with Antiochus Epiphanes and there arose a vast persecution of the faithful people of God.

What did God do?

Read Daniel 8 and tell me what he did. When Antiochus cast down truth to the ground and banned the daily burnt offering and the people's expression of their loyalty to God and to his truth, what did God do? When the pig was on the altar and the abomination of desolation was set up in the temple, what happened? Did Messiah appear in all his glory and cut down this fearful impostor? Is that what you read in Daniel 8? Ladies and gentlemen, nothing happened; the old persecutor prospered. God appeared to do and say nothing. There came no voice out of the temple, no lightning strike, no thunder; nothing but silence. The silence lasted for a very uncomfortable period, and the question is raised:

Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one who spoke, 'For how long is the vision concerning the regular burnt offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled underfoot?' (v. 13)

Why is there no description of the kingdom of the Messiah here? Well, it's not because there won't eventually be a kingdom, but Israel are being warned that there would come a time in history when, for a short period, a man would put himself in the place of God in the very temple of God, the place where they believed his presence dwelt. God would appear to do nothing; there would be a terrible silence. Can you see what question would be raised in the minds of many a Jew?

'What about truth? We thought there was an almighty God, who presented himself in this temple. We thought it was true, but now look. The whole temple has been trampled down, the abomination of desolation put in place, a pig offered on the altar, the Bible banned, the continual burnt offering taken away, the worship of God stopped. Antiochus has defied God and his temple, substituted the worship of the state and his god; why doesn't God say something? Why doesn't he do something? How can we go on believing that what we've been taught is true?'

The story in the second half of chapter 8 is there as a warning to Israel and to us. A time of similar persecution will come again in the years preceding the coming again of our Lord in power and great glory.

Revelation 11

So let me show you a similar vision, with a similar situation, that was given to John, the seer.

Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff, and I was told, 'Rise and measure the temple of God and the altar and those who worship there, but do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.' These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed. They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague, as often as they desire. (vv. 1-6)

These two witnesses have been given miraculous powers, and they resist all opposition. For a while they stand outside the temple, witnessing to the God of heaven and demonstrating to the whole earth that there is a God. And then what?

And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth. (vv. 7-10)

Can you see the situation? For a while there is this divinely, miraculously empowered witness to the fact that there is a God in heaven, and the temple represents him. And then the beast rises—the future equivalent of Antiochus Epiphanes, and he says, ‘Don’t let yourselves be fooled. These men claim that their miraculous power comes from some almighty God out there, but we can explain it. We have now been able to do the same things and get the same results in our laboratories; their power doesn’t come from a God out there at all. We have proved at last the truth about the universe. There is no supernatural God. Look at their dead bodies, lying in the street.’

The world will go mad with delight. At last it has been proved scientifically that there is no God out there, and they’ll even exchange presents. For all that dreadful period, heaven shall appear to do nothing. ‘What is truth?’ will become the central question of the whole universe. It shall be tough for believers then. Why doesn’t God intervene? Why doesn’t he strike him dead?

What is the truth, then, if the very temple of God can be desecrated and defiled, and God does nothing? ‘Be warned,’ says God, ‘what happened in the past will happen again in the future.’

What makes you think that Jesus Christ is the truth?

I am tempted to play the part of a preacher. We’re studying Daniel, but it provokes me to ask how you would decide the question, ‘What is truth?’ What would be the prime answer in your heart to persuade you that Jesus Christ is truth? Pilate thought that the main thing was power. ‘I have power,’ he said.

You say, ‘He did so many marvellous miracles, and my faith is in the miraculous.’

Well, that’s good, but what’s the ultimate demonstration of truth? I’ll tell you what it is. It came to its crisis when Christ stood before Pilate, and Pilate said, ‘I’ve got the power to control the vast empire of Rome, and your bit of it. It’s power that counts.’ And Christ said, ‘Pilate, you would have no power at all against me except it were given you from above’ (see John 19:10–11).

There’s a bigger question in this universe than power, and that is truth. What is the truth about us and the universe? What is the truth about you? Are you just a chance collection of atoms, or is there a God who made you? If there is, and he wants to prove to you the truth of the thing, how will he do it? I’ll tell you how he’ll do it. In the end, it wasn’t by fantastic miracles that he overcame Pilate and his supposed power, little as that was; the ultimate evidence of the truth is Jesus Christ nailed to a cross. It’s the truth about the universe, the truth about you, and the truth about God. You are a creature of God, and the God who made you has infinite power. But power isn’t the issue at last; love is.

As you look at Calvary, with Christ impaled upon a cross by the powers of his day, now you see the truth about the universe. There is a God and he loves you; and the truth was never more manifest than when they hung him, apparently helpless, on a tree. It was a battle for the heart, wasn’t it? Who would you give your heart to? The man with the biggest rockets, or the God who sent his Son to die for you?

I’m going to suggest that that is what the story is about in Daniel 8, and why it has no description of the coming of the Messianic kingdom.

By his cunning he shall make deceit prosper under his hand, and in his own mind he shall become great. Without warning he shall destroy many. And he shall even rise up against the Prince of princes, and he shall be broken—but by no human hand. (v. 25)

Of course that kingdom will come and he shall eventually be eliminated; but not until untruth has had a period of apparent success in the world. For those prescribed numbers of days and months and years, man shall appear to have triumphed, and to have eliminated God.

When the New Testament talks about the coming man of sin, you will notice the terms it uses:

Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. . . . The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because *they refused to love the truth* and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned *who did not believe the truth* but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thess 2:3–4, 9–12)

They did not believe the truth. Truth is the issue, isn't it? God shall send the unrepentant world a strong delusion that it may believe the lie. Why? 'Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved' (v. 10 KJV). This is the ultimate truth.

. . . when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might. (2 Thess 1:7–9)

Well, let me leave it there. All I want to do now is just to reinforce the point that, while Daniel 7 and 8 have much in common, it is upon their differences that we must ultimately focus our attention. Not content just with the patterning or the structure, we must look at the thought-flow and expound all the detail of these chapters. When we do that to chapter 8, we come up with something like what I have so lightly sketched in. There's much more in chapter 8, but these are perhaps the big issues.

While there is a similarity between chapters 3 and 6, or, if you like, 3 and 8—all being about persecution of the Jews, the issues at stake are seriously different. If we think they are the same, we are missing the fine focus of the book of Daniel.

Daniel 10–12

Let us look at the final vision. It is a description of what shall happen following the collapse of Persia and the rise of the Greek Empire, and particularly, once more, the rise of the great defiant king who exalts himself above God or all that is called God. In one sense, therefore,

chapters 10–12 are adding more detail to the history given in chapter 8. And, once more, this prophecy does not end with an exposition of Rome, as chapter 7 does. It ends in the Seleucid period, as chapter 8 does.

I'd better refine that statement at once. The nature of prophecy is as follows. Let me try to illustrate it. If you take Pharaoh and his persecution of the Jews, and the plagues that God rained down upon his head, you will see that it is not merely a historical story. You could project Pharaoh on to the future and you would have a kind of a foreshadowing of the future. Just as the plagues were sent on Pharaoh as warnings to lead him to repentance, which he then defied and was finally destroyed, so Revelation shows that at the end time there shall come plagues very much like those that fell on Egypt. So, then, in Pharaoh we have a foreview of certain aspects of the future.

Or you can take the great king of Assyria, who in his day defied God and his people (Isa 10), and you would have a prototype of what will happen in the future. There are features about Nebuchadnezzar and his persecution that become foreshadowings too. Very clearly also Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek. He's the chap who added the abomination that makes desolate, and that will recur in the future. What the Roman emperors did to the Christians and their self-deification become another foreview of the future.

The thing to notice is that, whereas these were separate people and movements in history, they are not projecting equally separate people and movements into the future. Some students of prophecy have worried their heads about this. In the future time, who will be the Pharaoh? Will he be the same as the Assyrian, and who is the Assyrian? Read the old commentaries of the nineteenth century, and they get really bothered about this. Is the Assyrian distinct from the man of sin, and is the man of sin the same as the antichrist, or is he somebody else?

Interesting topics, and the nature of prophecy is that each of the historical things adds certain features, but they all point to the one big thing in the future. Prophecy is like a succession of overhead projector films. Put Pharaoh on the thing, and as the light shines through the film, on the screen you get a vision of the future that looks very much like Pharaoh and the plagues on Egypt.

You say, 'Half a minute, the future will be a bit more complicated than that.'

So you put on the Assyrian. He did things that Pharaoh didn't do, and now, when you put that film on top of the first one, you're getting a composite picture of the future. The future will be composite like that. You can add Nebuchadnezzar, and you ought to add Antiochus Epiphanes, one on top of the other. As the Holy Spirit shines through them, he will give you a detailed, composite picture of what the future is going to be.

And so, in chapter 8 and chapter 10, the Holy Spirit is taking Antiochus Epiphanes of the Greeks, and shining through him to project a future that will contain elements like the abomination of desolation, first heard of under Antiochus.

When you come to chapter 7 and Revelation 13, God will take the Roman emperors and add them to the picture. Shining through them, he'll add more details to the composite picture of the future. You see that in the beasts. The fourth beast is not an ordinary beast; I tell you he isn't. You never saw such a conglomeration of beasts all in one beast as the final beast. He's the gathering up of very many things in history. It ought not to worry us then, if the fourth beast in chapter 7 is Rome, and God is using the Romans to be a prototype of the future. In

chapter 8 God uses the Greeks as a prototype of the future. That is not a contradiction; it is the way God does things. It has to be, because Antiochus was somewhat different from the Romans, and in the future there will be both a Roman and a Greek element.

Daniel 11

We're just going to look at that final vision of the Greeks once more, here in chapter 11 of Daniel. This is God showing Daniel what the future will hold, starting from the rise of the Greek Empire. It's a very long chapter, and it talks to us mainly of the many battles that went on between the Seleucids in the north and the Ptolemies in the south, and that was the fun and games for some many, many decades.

In that process, as the armies of the south swept up and the northerners swept down, poor old Palestine and Jerusalem got it in the neck, because the armies would take either the coastal or the mountain road. They were constantly marching backwards and forwards, and from time to time it looked as though one or other was going to attack Jerusalem. The people of Palestine, Jews included, were originally under the Egyptians, and when they lost control the Seleucids took over. In the course of those battles and the devastation resulting from all this absurd power politics, it looked as if the people of God and the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem were going to be cast down completely.

When it would blow up to a crisis, people would say, 'My brother, do you think this is the end time? Surely the features are there? They're now going to attack the temple and do away with everything. This is the coming of Messiah; all the signs are in shape.'

So they used to get really excited. But then the whole thing subsided and went back to square one. It wasn't the end, and it wasn't the coming of Messiah.

'Well, we made a little mistake about that.'

'Yes,' said some learned man, 'we oughtn't to set dates, you know. We need to be very careful about our interpretation of prophecy.'

Then the armies came again. 'Yes, he's going to do it this time. This is going to be it.'

It looked as if it was; it had all the elements. And then it petered out again. People didn't learn the lesson. When it was looming up the third time, they said, 'Yes, for sure, this is it. We can see where the early men were mistaken, but we couldn't possibly be mistaken. It's going to happen in 1984, or something'!

It didn't happen, but one day it will.

But then, you see, that's the nature of prophecy. Pharaoh was an anti-God man; there was a great crisis, and there were plagues, but it wasn't the end of the world. It wasn't even the end of the age; it was a prototype of it. So were all these others. History has a way of doing that kind of thing, so we must be careful.

After many shenanigans between the two powers, look what the prophet is told: 'For the king of the north shall again raise a multitude, greater than the first. And after some years he shall come on with a great army and abundant supplies' (11:13).

You say, 'What does that mean?'

It doesn't mean the end of the age; it means the end of that particular period, that's all. There would be great battles, but look at verse 19: 'Then he shall turn his face back towards

the fortresses of his own land, but he shall stumble and fall, and shall not be found' — all the apparent threat to Jerusalem subsides.

Then the whole process starts over again, with great danger to the people of God, it would appear. But look at verse 27, 'And as for the two kings, their hearts shall be bent on doing evil. They shall speak lies at the same table, but to no avail, for the end is yet to be at the time appointed.' Don't get overly excited, then. What a help this would have been for the godly to read in those times.

Then it comes up again worse, and this third time it's Antiochus Epiphanes himself and all his tremendous persecution. But verse 35 says, 'and some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the time of the end, for it still awaits the appointed time.' In other words, the end is not yet.

The last verses from 36 onward describe the final eruption which shall lead on to the end. What wise counsel that was for the people of God who had to live through those intervening centuries and the period of Antiochus Epiphanes. They would have learned from Daniel and this prophecy that this was not the end, and God would bring them through. What Antiochus did in his day was a prototype of the end, and that other who shall arise in remote times shall do even more wickedly, but he too shall come to his end.

Hence the value of the vision in chapter 12:

And someone said to the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream, 'How long shall it be till the end of these wonders?' And I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the stream; he raised his right hand and his left hand towards heaven and swore by him who lives for ever that it would be for a time, times, and half a time . . .' (vv. 6–7)

Just like Antiochus Epiphanes persecuted the Jews for three and a half years, so before *the end* there will be a time of unparalleled persecution. Daniel wanted to know how long this time of the end would be, and he is told it with authority by the man who stands above the river. He stands above time. The river of time moves on, and as it disappears over the horizon we ask ourselves where is it going, and what of the future? There is a man above the river who sees the end from the beginning; he knows what's going to happen and for how long.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (vv. 2–3)

From his vantage point he can see the glorious day of resurrection and the glory of the coming kingdom. He stands above the river to comfort his people, telling them that the worst that shall come is under the controlling hand of God.

That vision is matched in Revelation 10, just before the scene in chapter 11 where the temple shall eventually be assaulted, and the witnesses overcome. For that brief, terrible period it shall appear that the antichrist has triumphed and demonstrated that there is no God. But just before that, there is the vision of the strong angel who came down from heaven. He

put one foot on the land, and one on the sea, raised his hand to him that lives for ever and ever, and swore by almighty God that the time would be limited (10:5–6). God has it under his control. He offered John the book, the assurance of God's word, and told him to take it and eat it. Yes, parts of Revelation and Daniel do talk about the same period, so it is not surprising that similar visions were given to John and Daniel.

This is not a pulpit; it is a workshop, and all the rough attempts to hew out a picture leave a lot of shavings on the floor. And not only that, but dust in people's eyes. You'll get over it if you wash well after going home, but you will probably find some ideas that might be useful in your studies.

Thought-flow in the book of Revelation

I was invited to come and talk to you about my approach to the prophecy of Daniel. I elected also to talk about the Revelation because the visions given to John by God are in many respects similar to some of the visions given to Daniel and to others prophets, like Zechariah. It seemed to me that if we talked about the way the book of Daniel is composed, and demonstrated how important it is, sooner or later the lessons that we would learn from this approach to Daniel could profitably be applied to the book of the Revelation also. We ought to treat the book as a whole; try to understand what it is saying as a book; how the parts of it are related to one another; and how each part contributes to what it has to say to the whole, without unnecessary repetition.

The book of the Revelation is much disputed as to its meaning and interpretation, and I am not proposing that my way is the key that will solve all the problems. Commentaries come out like the proverbial peas out of a pod, but, nonetheless, it is not for us to grow cynical in our approach to these things. Under God, we must make every serious approach we can to study his word, believing it to be the word of God, whether we understand it or not; encouraged by our Lord's promise that we are to ask and we shall be given, we are to seek and we shall find, we are to knock and it shall be opened to us. Perhaps not at once, but as we show the Lord our sincerity by our perseverance in thinking about his word he will eventually fulfil his promise.

We mustn't expect that in any one generation we shall understand the whole of the Bible in all its infinite complexity. God shows generations what they can take, and sometimes leaves to other generations what he pleases to show them in their particular circumstances. In the understanding of the word of God, very often it is the experiences that God puts us through — both in our personal lives, and in the larger context of our particular day and generation — that prepare our thinking to see certain problems that other people didn't see. We look in the word of God and find that God foresaw the problem and he has an answer. But you don't normally see the answer unless you've first seen the problem.

My analysis of the structure of the book

With those kinds of things in mind, let's come again to the book of the Revelation, and I will show to you the kind of approach I would make. You can guess what that's going to be, can't you?

You say, 'The man is like a dog who put his nose in cheese at one stage, and then wherever he goes he always smells cheese. Having found a structure in one book, he has to find structures in every book, and you'll find he even talks about patterns!'

Yes, there are three things in the study of Scripture: thought-flow, structure and pattern—the greatest being thought-flow. And so, if we take the book of the Revelation in hand, I suggest we try and make ourselves a table of contents, but not just any table of contents. We shall follow thought-flow to try and determine what the major divisions of the book are, and whether we can come to any reasonable decision about its constituent elements. We must be prepared to remember that godly men and women and accurate scholars still come to different analyses, but let's proceed nothing daunted.

1:1–3:22

The vision of the Son of Man and the letters to the seven churches

Chapter 1

It begins with its title and introduction, and then John is given this spectacular vision of the Son of Man standing in the midst of seven golden lampstands. The scene is described in great detail by John as it appeared to him in the split second before the light in the face of the Son of Man, shining as the sun in noonday strength, had John prostrate on the ground.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.' (1:17–19)

Chapters 2–3

So the vision and the commission to write come in chapter 1. But you can't end the story there. Chapter 1 is obviously not a major climax, because chapter 2 carries on with John doing what he was told to do. From the middle of the lampstands the Son of Man dictates seven successive letters that are to be sent to seven churches, represented by the lampstands.

The writing of those letters fills chapters 2 and 3, and when the last letter is written to the last church, Laodicea, then that vision comes to its logical end. I think all would agree that in chapters 1–3 you have the first major section of the book of the Revelation, complete in itself. The first vision is over.

4:1–7:17

Theme: the throne of God

Chapter 4

The change here is very clearly marked. Indeed, the location at which John is given the second vision is very different. Note the details in verse one carefully:

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! . . .

You may not realize why I stress that; I have my own devious intentions in doing so. The text says that something is opened in heaven.

And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, *a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne.* (vv. 1–2)

When John is admitted through the door he sees this large object of 'heavenly furniture', if I might put it that way. There was a throne.

Having been introduced to the topic of the throne, we shall want to follow the thought-flow. How far does it go in the subsequent verses and chapters? Well, it fills chapter 4, because we are given a description in geometrical terms of that throne. We shall not pause now to try and understand what those terms are saying. Perhaps we shall talk of that tomorrow. We're just noticing the thought-flow.

Chapter 4 now goes on to describe this throne, and comes to a minor climax when the living creatures give honour and glory:

thanks to *him who is seated on the throne*, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before *him who is seated on the throne* and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They cast their crowns *before the throne*, saying . . . (vv. 9–10)

You've noticed John's repetition, haven't you?

'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things . . .' (v. 11)

And we gather that this is the throne of the Creator. A minor climax, then, but not the end of the topic of the throne.

Chapter 5

Then I saw in the right hand of *him who was seated on the throne* a scroll written . . . (v. 1)

Why doesn't John vary his language? Hadn't he better learn a bit of stylistics? Instead of keeping on saying, 'him who was seated on the throne', say, 'God' or something, or, 'the Lord', or 'Jehovah', or, 'the Almighty'; but he keeps repeating this phrase.

The challenge for someone to come and open the scroll was met by the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is also the Lamb: 'he went and took the scroll from the right hand of *him who was seated on the throne*' (v. 7). And when he had taken the scroll, it gave rise to worship, and the worship fills the rest of that chapter. Look at verses 13–14, the worship is still in these terms:

'To *him who sits on the throne* and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshipped.

And there you have another climax.

We're watching a drama, and this is not the final climax of the section. Look at the whole scene through John's eyes. First he's shown a throne, and it is described; then he's shown a book that's in the hand of him who sits on the throne. The challenge is not merely for

somebody to come and take the book, but to open its seals. 'Who is worthy to open the book and break its seals?' is the point. When they see the Lamb take the book, they break forth in their worship. But that's only half the story, so we can't break it off there, can we?

Chapter 6

To fulfil the challenge, he must now proceed to break the seals and open the book, so we must follow the opening of the seals.

We come to the opening of the sixth seal:

I looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth . . . (vv. 12–13)

The result of it was this:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of [God Almighty, and from the wrath of the Lamb? No!] *him who is seated on the throne . . .*' (vv. 15–16)

Have you forgotten where you are? You are with John in heaven viewing the throne. The Lamb has come and taken the book, and he's now opening the seals. As he opens the seals you see what is happening down there on earth. The result of the opening of the sixth seal is that the people on earth cry to the rocks to cover them from the face of him who is seated on the throne. The vision is proceeding; the thought-flow is going on.

'Ah, yes,' say some commentators, 'that might be so, sir; but now you've come to chapter 7, and that is a parenthesis.' If you haven't come across that notion, my advice is, don't! It could be a parenthesis in someone's systematic theology, but it cannot be called a parenthesis in John's book. Look what he said.

Chapter 7

While they cry, 'hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?', John says he saw four angels who are commanded not to harm anything until the servants of God are sealed on their foreheads (see 6:16–7:1–8).

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing [in heaven, in one of the many mansions? No!] *before the throne* and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God [who created heaven and earth? No!] *who sits on the throne*, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing *round the throne* and round the elders and the four living creatures [who had been described as being round the throne in chapter 4, of course], and they fell on their faces *before the throne* and worshipped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.' (vv. 9–12)

And at that point one of the elders asks John a question.

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are *before the throne* of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and *he who sits on the throne* will shelter them with his presence.' (vv. 13–15)

It is getting very repetitious, isn't it? Why on earth all this repetition? If you asked John, he'd say, 'Because there will be some people round about 1996 who will insist on saying that this chapter is a parenthesis. So we'd better stop them doing that, if we can, by pointing out the thought-flow!' Thought-flow can be useful.

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb *in the midst of the throne* will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (vv. 16–17)

These comments are from one of the elders. He and John are both there; the elder is sitting on one of the thrones around the throne. Earlier he had cast his crown before the throne (4:4, 10). He's telling John the significance of this great multitude; how they come to stand before the throne while the kings of the earth are crying for the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of him that sits on the throne. How can they possibly stand there in that full blaze of the light, when others are crying to be hidden from it? As the elder explains it, notice the repetition of 'the throne', and with this comment our eyes are taken off to the great future, when all tears shall be wiped away.

For the Lamb *in the midst of the throne* will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (v. 17)

These words are taking us on to the great and final state, and there'll be echoes of that when you come to the final chapters of the book. As soon as John entered this open door in heaven he saw the throne, and the throne has now dominated the whole scene through chapters 4–7. The logical thought-flow ends with a fitting climax of a view of the eternal state.

8:1–11:18

Theme: time and timing

What happens next? Will it be the same theme?

Chapter 8

When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was *silence in heaven for about half an hour*. Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar [as distinct from the ordinary altar]

before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. (8:1–4)

I'm sure you haven't forgotten how this scene started in chapter 4. Of course not! A door was opened in heaven. Then in chapter 5, the Lamb alone was found worthy to take the book from the one who was seated on the throne and open the seals. This is the seventh seal, and when it is opened there is silence in heaven.

John's attention is drawn to more pieces of heavenly furniture. Not the throne this time so much as, first, the big altar, and then *the golden altar of incense*. It's that golden altar of incense and the service performed there that now become the focus of attention, and will govern what follows.

For time's sake, I'm not going to do the work for you, but point out what the theme is. There was silence in heaven for half an hour. However you subsequently interpret that, please notice that the opening emphasis is on this question of timing—how long the silence lasted.

Chapter 9

In this section of the Revelation, you begin to get a tremendous emphasis on timing. We are told of the plagues that follow, for instance, that some of them lasted for *five months*, and so forth (v. 5).

Chapter 10

We've been thinking of time, and the waiting period, and the silence in heaven.

And the angel whom I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there would be *no more delay*, but that *in the days* of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God would be fulfilled, just as he announced to his servants the prophets. (vv. 5–7)

Chapter 11

The court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample the holy city for forty-two months. And I will grant authority to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days . . . (vv. 2–3)

And then at the end of their ministry they are overcome, and their dead bodies lie in the street, and the time that they lie is *'three and a half days'* (v. 9). When they are finally raised, *'at that hour'* there comes a great earthquake; *'The second woe has passed; behold, the third woe is soon to come'* (vv. 13–14).

This is to be the climax, the final sounding of the trumpet.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, *'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever'* (v. 15).

Then not one elder, but all twenty-four elders make their comment.

There could be shades of pattern coming up now, if you're not careful! The section with chapters 4–7 ended with a comment by one of the elders (7:13–17). Now, as the trumpets come to an end with the blowing of the seventh, the comment is made by all twenty-four elders. They've been watching the scene very carefully, and they know what the issue is at stake. It has been a question of time: how long the silence; how long the ministry of these prophets; how long before the end; and how long the delay—the angel said it would be very short.

And now their comment:

We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign. The nations raged, but your wrath came, and *the time* for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth. (vv. 17–18)

So we come to the end and the climax of the seven trumpets with a comment by the twenty-four elders who are on the scene. As it opened so it ends, on this matter of time and timing. In chapter 4 there was a door opened in heaven and, being summoned there, John saw a great article of temple furniture—the throne. In chapter 8 the seventh seal was opened, followed by a silence in heaven and John was shown another great article of heavenly furniture—the golden altar of incense. The question of the silence lasting half an hour set the theme going. I warned you that the pattern was beginning to repeat.

11:19–15:4

Theme: power and authority

Chapter 11

Now this next big section opens with something opened in heaven, and another piece of heavenly furniture—the ark of his covenant (v. 19). Why is the ark of the covenant relevant?

I'm going to throw out a suggestion to you. The ark of the covenant is so called because it contained the two tables of stone, the basis of God's covenant with the people of Israel. The first of the commandments written on the tables of stone was this:

You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image . . . you shall not bow down to them or serve them . . . (Exod 20:3–5)

Chapters 12–13

This is the part of Revelation that's going to tell us about the time when *Satan shall give to the beast his throne and power*. The masses will go mad in their adulation of the beast, helped forward by the second beast, the false prophet. They shall make an image to the beast, and lead the nations to worship him (13:14–15).

In their folly they shall cry, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?' (v. 4). That's a rhetorical question, and means that the beast is unique. But they are using the phrase that in the Old Testament is confined to God, 'Who is like you, O LORD?' (Exod 15:11). Well,

nobody is like God. He's unique. This was the first term of the Ten Commandments in the ark of the covenant, 'You shall have no other gods before me.' Deceived by the devil, man is striving to do what the devil put before him in the garden of Eden, wanting to be God. It is the final impiety and blasphemy, and the crowds cry, 'Who is like the beast?'

Chapter 15

Notice how that section eventually comes to an end with a comment:

And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also *those who had conquered the beast* and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, 'Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O *King of the nations!* Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.' (15:2–4)

These have got the victory over the beast and they're protesting against the beast's propaganda. They are insisting on the uniqueness of God as the only one to be worshipped. In their hearts they've triumphed over the beast and all his lies, and now they are making a comment by 'the sea of glass'. (I wonder what that is, but it's a story for another day.)

The comment is not being made by one elder, nor yet twenty-four elders, but those who have conquered the beast.

15:5–19:10

Theme: beauty and clothing

Chapter 15

When that comment brings that section to the end, the next one begins. You couldn't guess, could you, how the next one begins?

After this I looked, and *the sanctuary of the tent of witness in heaven was opened* (v. 5)

Well, fancy that! There are three things to be taken into account in the study of Scripture, you know: thought-flow, structure, and pattern! Can you see how the pattern is repeating itself?

Chapter 16

(Behold, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake, *keeping his garments on, that he may not go about naked* and be seen exposed!) (v. 15)

With my eye on the clock, I must omit the details and come to the end of this section.

Chapter 17

There's a woman and she's riding a beast. If you looked at her, you would see a certain amount of attractiveness. There's certainly colour on her cheeks and in her clothes. There's a certain

'style' about her. But perhaps the rouge on the face is a bit too brazen, and the colours are too pronounced. The woman is a harlot, dressed up like harlots would be. She's an unfaithful woman, riding the beast, when she could have been a bride of the Lamb.

Chapter 18

There's another woman. They're both called *Babylon*, but her style is tremendous. Not too much rouge here; she's full of the beautiful things such as you'd find in the best shopping malls. What's wrong with her, then? There's something wrong.

We shall have to consider that another day, but in both cases of the women their clothing becomes significant. It's a question of beauty, but it's beauty gone wrong, and God judges both of them.

Chapter 19

In their place there is the bride of the Lamb. And what about her? Well, it's her clothes too that are emphasized, and they are exceedingly beautiful (vv. 7–8).

It comes with a great outburst of praise to God on the part of many voices of different kinds, giving him thanks for having judged and destroyed the harlot, Babylon, the false woman.

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to *clothe herself with fine linen*, bright and pure—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.' And he said to me, 'These are the true words of God.' Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God.' For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. (vv. 7–10)

Did you notice what the comment was about? It was about the Lamb's wife. How is that relevant to what's gone before? Well, that was the vision of *two women*. This section, then, the fifth in the book of Revelation, has its dominant theme running through, and like all the others, it comes to a conclusion with a comment, this time by the sundry voices mentioned here.

19:11-22:21

The King/Judge and the new Jerusalem

Chapter 19

And when it's over, you couldn't begin to guess how the next section is going to begin, could you? Possibly you could! 'Then I saw *heaven opened*' (v. 11). But now he doesn't see some piece of heavenly furniture, he sees a rider on a white horse coming out to effect the judgments of God. That section will carry on throughout the rest of the book and come to its end with more delightful comments, some by John but, more importantly, by the comment of our blessed Lord himself (22:16–21).

That, I suggest to you, is a possible reading of the *structure* of the book. We've traced it out by following thought-flow, and then the emerging patterns at the beginnings and endings of those sections.

I'm now going to hand out to you my working analysis—it's no more than that—of the book of Revelation. You may care to take it home, and if you can't sleep, like King Darius upon his bed, then you could call for the sheet to be brought to you, and read it and see whether you think there's any validity in it.

1. 1:1–3:22. The first vision in the first column is the vision of the Son of Man and the churches; the piece of furniture is the lampstand. That is one whole, logical, thought-flow, coming to its end with the final letter to the final church.

2. 4:1–7:17. Section two begins with the door opened in heaven; the piece of furniture is the throne. The theme of the throne dominates the whole of the succeeding section to the end of chapter 7, when there is a comment by one of the elders.

3. 8:1–11:18. The third begins with the seventh seal being opened and silence in heaven; the piece of heavenly furniture, in particular, is the golden altar of incense. The theme of timing dominates what follows and that particular section ends by the final triumph and the comment on it by the twenty-four elders.

4. 11:19–15:4. When their comment is finished, the next scene opens with the temple of God opened in heaven; the piece of heavenly furniture is the ark of God's covenant. The theme is power and authority. That section likewise ends by a comment, with the song by the victors over the beast. Their comment is relevant because they have overcome the beast, which now dominates the central parts of that section of the book.

5. 15:5–19:10. The next section begins with something opened in the heaven, the temple of the tabernacle of testimony. The theme is clothing. First, the angels' beautiful clothing (15:6). They have come to execute the judgments of God, upon Babylon in particular (ch. 17). Babylon's clothing is mentioned, and so is the clothing of the woman in chapter 18, also called Babylon. That section comes to its climax with the marriage supper of the Lamb. The clothing of the bride is mentioned and, once more, a comment, a response, by the great multitude.

6. 19:11–22:21. The final section of the book begins with heaven itself being opened and the rider coming out. The book finishes with the threefold testifying of Jesus, and the grace.

That is my working hypothesis as to the possible structure of the book of the Revelation. We shall want to know why it is structured that way. Is it just a convenient way of handling the thing, or has the structure any meaning? What are these six sections; what are they saying, and how are they related to one another?

Some interpretations of the book of the Revelation concentrate on the three series of judgments: the judgments when the seals are unloosed; the judgments when the trumpets are blown; the judgments when the bowls are upturned and poured out. When they come to 11:19–15:4, they say, 'There is no series of judgments here, so this is a great parenthesis.' That's always a useful word. How can it be a parenthesis if it is one of the major sections of the book? It follows the same pattern as all the sections except the first, with something opened in heaven; it has a piece of heavenly tabernacle furniture; and then there's a dominating theme all the way through the section, ending by an appropriate comment.

It may be appropriate in a systematic scheme of prophecy to call it a parenthesis, but from a literary point of view it is not a parenthesis; it is an integral section of the book.

I hope to make some suggestions to you tomorrow as to what these big sections are about in their dominant themes. And how, thematically, from the point of view of literary structure, patterning, and, supremely, thought-flow, John is being given a message which coheres in all its six major parts; each providing an angle on the multi-faceted truth that the spirit of God is communicating to us.

Images From the Tabernacle

Yesterday we began our short study of the book of the Revelation by making ourselves a simple table of contents. To do that we employed thought-flow, asking ourselves where each story begins and where it ends; where the climaxes are, the minor climaxes and the major climaxes. As we did that, we came up with the idea that there are six major sections to the book.

We noticed also that there was a pattern emerging in front of our eyes. The *first major section* of the book, of course, is the first three chapters, because they are one and the same vision: the Son of Man standing, surrounded by seven golden lampstands. When the details of the imagery in chapter 1 are explained, the lampstands are said to be figures of seven churches, and the stars in his right hand are the angels of the seven churches. John is told to write as our Lord dictates seven letters in succession, one to each of these seven churches.

So chapter 1 is the initial vision plus John's commissioning. Chapters 2 and 3 continue as those letters are dictated and written down. When the last letter is written to the last church, that first major section of the book concludes.

Thought-flow. As each of the succeeding major sections of the book is opened, it begins with something opened in heaven.

Section two: a door is opened in heaven.

Section three: the seventh seal is opened as the Lamb takes the book and opens the seals.

Section four: the temple of God in heaven is opened.

Section five: the temple of tabernacle of testimony in heaven is opened.

Section six: heaven itself is opened.

We noticed an emerging pattern. In sections two–five, as something is opened in heaven, we are given a vision of some part of the heavenly tabernacle.

Section two: the throne, and then the twenty-four thrones around it.

Section three: the big altar first, and then the golden altar of incense, with smoke rising from the incense.

Section four: the ark of God's covenant.

Section five: the temple is filled with smoke from God's glory and power. As the angels come out from the innermost part of the temple, the glory of God that filled the Most Holy Place now fills the whole temple with smoke, and no one can enter the sanctuary until the plagues of the bowls are finished.

Then we noticed another pattern emerging. Sections two through six all end with quite an extensive comment by someone or other.

Section two: the comment is by one of the elders.

Section three: the comment is by all twenty-four elders.

Section four: the comment is given in the form of a song by the victors over the beast.

Section five: it is in the form of a response by the great multitude.

Section six: at the end of the book itself, the comment is by the threefold testifying of Jesus.

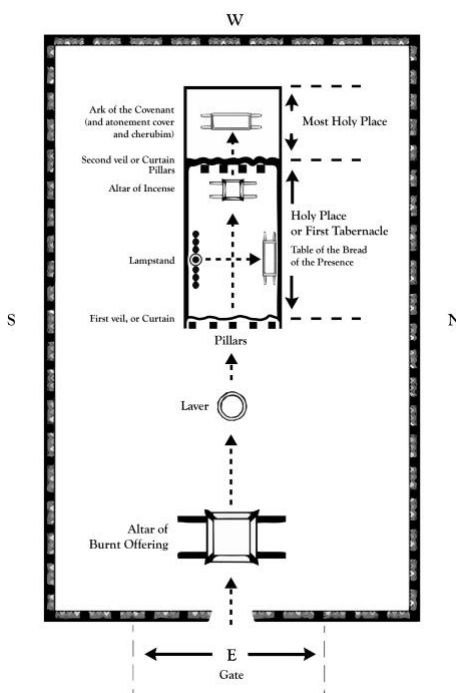
So far, then, thought-flow and pattern. Obviously we shall not be able to cover the book nor expound every detail, and my job is to resist all temptation to preach. I want to make a few more suggestions and put them into the pool of your thinking. Some will be known to you already.

How are the sections related to each other?

You may remember my analogy of the hand. It's not enough to say that a hand has a square bit in the middle, four bits at the top, and one at the side. To describe a hand, you must be able to describe and explain the functional relationship of each of its members. Why does the bit stick out at the side and the four at the top, and how are they functionally related to do their job?

Similarly, with a book like this it's not enough just to divide it into sections, and to see the author's plan of those sections. We need to go further and enquire, what is the functional relationship between the sections themselves? So notice now the functional relationship between section two and section three. Sections two and three, as with four and five, begin by John being shown some feature of the heavenly tabernacle. The imagery, of course, is taken from the tabernacle of Moses, the building of which is described in the book of Exodus.

To understand the Revelation, it is an enormous help if you have a knowledge of the tabernacle. Might I say in passing; the tabernacle is not the old-fashioned doctrine that some modern Christians imagine it to be. It is one of those fundamental images that God gives in his word as a thought pattern to help us analyse the deep things of God. It is used here in the book of the Revelation, so let's look at the features of it that we find at the beginning of sections two and three.



As you know, the ark with the cherubim on it was in the Most Holy Place. This formed the throne of God. Some rabbis prefer to think it was the footstool of God's throne.

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel. (Exod 25:22).

Or, as the book of Chronicles expressed it, 'the LORD who sits enthroned above the cherubim' (1 Chr 13:6). Here then is the throne of God, his divine presence. Inside the ark are the tables of the law that are the expression of his own character and the fundamental principles of his law and covenant.

The ark and the incense altar had a functional relationship

Standing outside in the Holy Place were the table and the lampstand, but they are not presented here in these two visions. What is presented is the little altar of incense, with the smoke of the incense going up before God. The veil was between the altar of incense and the ark, but as the priest stood at the altar offering the incense at the time of prayer, his altar had a functional relationship with the ark. In Luke 1, as Zechariah offered incense in the temple, he was addressing himself to God whom he believed was enthroned between the cherubim.

It is no accident, then, that section two begins with a vision of the throne, and section three begins with a vision of the incense altar. In Revelation, they are not only reminding us of their functional relationship, but of the theological relationship between the two of them.

What kind of a throne is it?

Section two of the Revelation, therefore, sets about telling us that there is a throne in heaven. You can sense the drama of it, can't you? Says John, 'I heard a voice behind me as of a trumpet, and a door was opened in heaven, and the voice summoned me up there, and I got into heaven' (see Rev 4:1). What's the first thing you'll look for when you get to heaven? Yes, a throne. As you survey this chaotic earth, you might find it difficult to believe that there is a throne in heaven—many people do; and the throne is not vacant, but it is occupied. That's a magnificent gospel message.

We shall be enquiring what the nature of that throne is, because presently you are going to see judgments proceeding from it, and some of them are so severe that human beings shall gnaw their very tongues for pain. What kind of a throne is it that would emit such judgments on mere flesh and bone? We shall want to know that; and therefore we shall find this throne is described in great detail. It is perhaps the major thing that we need to get hold of when we emerge into section two, and then go through all the sections. What kind of a throne is it? What kind of a government? What kind of a ruler sits on that throne, who will be responsible for these judgments?

There's a throne in heaven, therefore, and it will issue judgments. But to many thoughtful people that raises a second question. If you're talking to them in your personal witness, sooner or later they'll put it to you: 'You say there's a throne in heaven, and you believe in God? Why doesn't he stop Hitler then? Why doesn't he put down evil?' That's how they used to talk in

Britain during the war. Now it's, 'How long will he allow the slaughter and ethnic cleansing to go on in Yugoslavia?'

Isn't that curious? There are two sides to this question. Some people don't want there to be a throne in heaven because they fear its judgments, so they prefer to think there isn't one. But then if you can prove to them that there is a God they take the opposite side. They don't say, 'Why does he judge?' but, 'Why doesn't he judge?' Isn't it funny how human nature is?

The silence in heaven

But, of course, there are problems involved in the matter and, therefore the third section in the book of Revelation will concentrate our minds, not simply on the throne, but on the incense altar. The section begins with a very dramatic silence in heaven. As the seventh seal is opened, there's silence in heaven for half an hour.

The commentators debate the matter of this silence in heaven. One of the more recent suggestions I heard was that it's simply the interval between two acts of the play. It's just saying that one is finished and we're not quite ready to start the next one, so take a breather. Get your morning coffee, or something like that. It can't be that, can it?

Why is there a silence for half an hour in heaven? One answer to that would be to ask in the drama of the book what it was that broke the silence. I don't know if you have Remembrance Day over here for those who fell in the two world wars, like we do. There is a two-minute silence, and if ever you've been in a large congregation and experienced the two-minute silence, it seems like eternity. Two minutes seem to go on, and on, and on. It's all very different when you're running to catch a train or something; but when you're just standing there and it's silent . . .

Just imagine being in heaven with this great multitude and thousands and thousands of angels, equipped with trumpets, and there's silence. I don't know if they have clocks in heaven, but one minute, five minutes, fifteen minutes, 'When is this silence going to end?' John is standing there reverently. 'Is Gabriel about to do anything? Why doesn't somebody blow a trumpet or do something?' Twenty minutes, 'When's it going to end? I wonder what will end it; what will break the silence?' That's tremendous drama, isn't it? You know, if you want to enjoy Revelation, you have to picture it in your mind. John saw it, didn't he? It's helpful to see it like John saw it, as a great drama going on in front of you.

What broke the silence?

Then I saw seven angels . . . and seven trumpets were given to them . . .

But before they had the chance to blow the trumpets,

another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and he was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar before the throne, and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel. Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth, and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (8:2-5)

There came a big sound to end the silence, and what initiated it? What had broken the silence? The prayers of the saints coming up before God, now at long last to be answered. In that simple piece of drama there are centuries of heartache, centuries of prayer, with a problem that has vexed not merely the ungodly but the people of God for many long generations.

Listen to the psalmist.

O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; and they say, 'The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.' (Ps 94:1-7)

'O Lord, how long?' From the slaves of Israel in Egypt under the taskmaster's lash; to the captives carried away by Assyria; to Rachel weeping for her children because they are not; to the mothers in Bethlehem mourning their little babes, slaughtered by Herod. Or the Christians being thrown to the lions; or Jews who genuinely believed in God, though they were not Christians, in Hitler's concentration camps; to many of our fellow believers at this present moment. A cry goes out from their hearts, 'Lord, you're supposed to care for justice. Why don't you intervene? How long, O Lord?'

You see, the two subjects are intimately bound together. You can't believe there's a throne that cares for justice without the cry coming through your heart, 'Well, then, if you care for justice, Lord, when are you going to intervene and put down evil?' Do you see my very simple point? But it's important that the sectioning of the book of the Revelation is not arbitrary. It's not a question merely of a railway timetable. It comes to the very heart of the human problem, and sections two and three stand side by side because they are functionally and thematically and, in the end, theologically related.

Asking God for vengeance

I shall have to pause here to justify what I mean. Some commentaries say that in chapter 8 you are in an altogether different dispensation because the saints are crying for God to take vengeance, and that's not a thing Christians ought to do. Christians have to follow the example of our Lord, who prayed, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34), but Jews of a later dispensation will be allowed to behave in an unchristian manner, and pray to God for vengeance. That is a proposition that I think needs closer examination.

The Lord Jesus told a parable, and he said that men ought always to pray, and not to give up praying (Luke 18:1-8). I pause. Would you suppose that applies to Christians, or are we exempt from that? Are we expected to go on praying and not be tempted to give up? I imagine so. Pray about what? Well, our Lord told the parable to illustrate the point.

In a certain city there happened to be a judge, and a good widow woman came to him because the businessmen in town were oppressing and robbing her. She pleaded with the judge. She wasn't asking for revenge. What she was asking for was simple justice, 'Give me justice against my adversary' (v. 3). *Avenge* is a different thing from *revenge*, isn't it? If the

insurance people swindled you out of £10,000, you'd try and get some redress. You're not asking for revenge, that the manager of the insurance company should be decapitated next week; you're asking simply for justice.

So the woman came to the judge and asked for justice. Well, he was a rascal, and 'neither feared God nor respected man' (v. 2). He did nothing about it. Judge though he was, he wasn't interested in justice, and the case looked hopeless. But this widow wasn't for giving up. She came, and she came, and, to use our Lord's colourful words, 'this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming' (v. 5). She sort of beat him black and blue, and the judge in the end got exasperated. 'If I don't give in and do something, she'll be the end of me.' So he gave her the justice she required, unprincipled judge though he was. It's a good job she didn't give up. She might have said to herself, 'I shall just have to put up with the injustice.' She persisted and in the end she was avenged.

'And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily' (vv. 7-8). He may take a long while before he rises up and judges, but he'll do it; and until he rises up to judge, his people must continue praying.

Why must we continue praying?

Because, if we leave off praying, it is casting an aspersion on the character of God. It is to suggest that God himself is less interested in justice than that old rascal who lived in the town where the woman was. What is your estimate of the character of God? Does he care for justice? Will he one day exert his divine justice and avenge his people? Well, of course, he will. Is it right for us to pray in that way? We don't have an option; we are commanded to. '[We] ought always to pray and not lose heart' (v. 1).

It's hard going, isn't it? It can be hard for believers under persecution to believe that there is a God in heaven who cares for justice. Their faith in the character of God is under trial and test. We must pray, says Christ. Then he adds, 'Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?' (v. 8). Shall he find faith on the earth, or will people have given up, and even his people decided it's not worth praying?

How did the Lord Jesus pray?

You say, 'But it isn't *Christian*, is it? Our Lord Jesus didn't pray for God to rise up and do justice. Did he not pray, "Father, forgive them", for the soldiers who were putting the nails through his hands?' It was on the ground that they didn't know what they were doing. They were just Roman soldiers, doing their job. They didn't know what was involved in it. He prayed explicitly on that ground, 'Father, forgive them, *for they know not what they do*' (Luke 23:34). It will make a difference if people do know what they're doing.

But as for our Lord's attitude to God and his execution of justice, listen to him on the way to Calvary when the women of Jerusalem are weeping for him. With compassion, and yet firmness, he says,

Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

For behold, the days are coming when they will say, 'Blessed are the barren and the wombs

that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!’ Then they will begin to say to the mountains, ‘Fall on us’, and to the hills, ‘Cover us.’ For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry? (Luke 23:28–31)

Peter was writing to comfort and encourage believers who were being maltreated, either as slaves by their taskmasters, or about to be persecuted by the government. He bids them follow the example of the Lord Jesus, and not to retaliate.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet 2:21–24)

What an insight it was into our Lord’s thoughts and heart, as he walked that road up to Calvary and talked to the women about the coming judgments of God. He didn’t retaliate, because he loved even his enemies and would give them time to repent and live righteously. He found strength to do that because he believed with unshakeable certainty and faith that there was a God in heaven who cares for justice, and one day he would see that justice is done: ‘He . . . committed himself to him that judges righteously’ (v. 23 KJV).

One day justice will be done

Incarcerated on the Isle of Patmos, John is writing to believers who are about to pass through an exceedingly fiery time of persecution. He asks them to remember there is a throne in heaven, and that one day their prayers shall be answered; the throne in heaven shall rise up and see that justice is done.

So that I am not pushing things further than perhaps John or the Lord intended, let’s just look again at section three. How does it end? The climax comes in chapter 11 when the seventh angel sounded.

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdom [the rule] of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever.’ And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God . . . (11:15–16)

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no unnecessary repetition here. When once more we read that the elders are sitting before God on their thrones, we are reminded of their function. For their part, they share the government with God. Sitting on real thrones, when at last they see justice done, and the name of the throne vindicated throughout the universe, their grateful praise rises to the central throne: ‘We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign’ (v. 17). That’s an aorist tense, and it indicates the initiative of the action, ‘you have . . . begun to reign.’

The nations raged, but your wrath came, and *the time* for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth. (v. 18)

The prayers of the saints that started the process in this third section come to their climax when God rises up. The time has come at last. Did you notice the ‘time’ element? There was silence for half an hour to begin with, broken by the prayers of the saints, ‘How long, O Lord, how long?’ At last the Lord comes to judge the earth, as Psalms 94, 96 and 97 promise he will. When he rises up, the time is come to see that justice is done and to reward his servants, the prophets and saints, and to destroy them who destroyed the earth. Of course, in the end his timetable will involve dispensations; but it is good to start from, what you may call, the *thematic* arrangement of the book of Revelation.

So now let’s notice something on our table of contents

In *section two*, there is a vision of the throne of God.

Section three begins with a vision of the golden altar of incense which is before the throne. The chapter notices explicitly, ‘and the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel’ (8:4).

In *section four* it not only begins with the ark of God’s covenant—another name for the throne of God, but you are going to read of another throne, the throne of the beast. ‘And the beast that I saw was like a leopard; its feet were like a bear’s, and its mouth was like a lion’s mouth. And to it the dragon gave his power *and his throne* and great authority’ (13:2). Set up and inspired by Satan, this throne is in opposition to God and occupied by the beast.

Section five begins with a vision of the tabernacle of testimony in heaven opened, and God now rising up to judge. We’re told, ‘the sanctuary was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power’ (15:8). Smoke again in the heavenly tabernacle, but whereas in section three it was smoke from the incense and the prayers of the saints, now it is smoke from the glory of God: his personal glory and the expression of his character, as he rises up to see that justice is done. He commissions the angels to take out the seven bowls of the seven plagues.

The description of the throne in section two and the opposite throne in section four; the smoke in section three, and the smoke in section five—even those small details are not placed accidentally in this great tapestry. This vision was given to John by God and it is done with divine precision. We shall come back to the question of thematic arrangement a little later on and look at some of the patterns in these sections, and some of the great themes to which they point.

John’s second vision

Here we are first introduced to the throne itself (4:2), and then to the Lamb who took the book from the hand of him who was seated on the throne (5:6–7). In chapter 6 we are told what happens when the Lamb undoes the seals of the book, and then the results in chapter 7.

The throne itself is described in chapter 4:

... *round* the throne was [Gk. *the*] a rainbow that had the appearance of an emerald. *Round* the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. (vv. 3–4)

I hope your English translation does the Greek justice. In both verses it is the same preposition, 'round'.

Two things that are said to be *round the throne*, and the description is given, as the literary men would say, in a *chiasm*: *round the throne* was the rainbow; *round the throne* were twenty-four thrones. That's a chiasm.

In verse 5 it's a different geometrical preposition:

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

And that stands by itself.

Now another pair, in chiasmic order:

and *before the throne* were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, and *before the throne* there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.

And then,

And *round the throne*, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind. (vv. 5–6)

This is a Hebrew way of saying that they were in the midst: their hindquarters were underneath the throne, and yet their faces were outwards, so they were round about the throne, like the oxen under the sea, the laver, in Solomon's temple.

Then he made the sea of cast metal. It was round, ten cubits from brim to brim, and five cubits high, and a line of thirty cubits measured its circumference. Under its brim were gourds, for ten cubits, compassing the sea all round. The gourds were in two rows, cast with it when it was cast. It stood on twelve oxen, three facing north, three facing west, three facing south, and three facing east. The sea was set on them, and all their rear parts were inward. (1 Kgs 7:23–25)

These living creatures were in the midst, and yet round about the throne. They carried it. Their hindquarters were underneath the big bowl, and their heads poked out the side. If you want a similar situation, read his description of the throne and the cherubim in Ezekiel 1.

This is a pattern, ladies and gentlemen, and I didn't invent it. The throne is being described with geometrical patterns.

In the first two: 'round the throne' (4:3–4): '*round* the throne was the rainbow.' Presumably a full circle and vertical, like the rainbows we know. '*Round* the throne were twenty-four thrones'; same preposition, but they're not vertical, we hope. They must be horizontal. There they are, all the way round the throne. From the throne came flashes of lightning, and so forth and so on. They make one pair.

Now the next pair: 'before the throne' (vv. 5–6): 'Before the throne were burning seven torches of fire.' They were torches, not oil lamps. 'Before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.'

And then, in the midst and round about, were the living creatures, their hindquarters inward and their heads facing outward, geometrically done.

We have to make up our minds, what is this description meant to do for us? Has it any meaning or is it simply impressionism, like modern art? Splashes of colour here, another splash of colour there, and some funny grotesque shapes not recognizable as being anything in earth or heaven, or elsewhere. It's there merely to make an impression, and it wasn't meant for analysis. Is that what this description of the throne in chapter 4 is like?

Here is a throne; it's the throne of God and, therefore, passes all understanding. All you could get was the vaguest impression of it, and he uses this geometrical stuff to create a kind of mood. You mustn't try to analyse it.

Who would vote for that? Well, you may be obliged to one of these days.

But it could perhaps be meaningful, couldn't it? Let's go on the hunt and see if it could be. If we come up with absurdities, nonsense and excessive fancy, we can scrub it all out and revert to the impressionist theory.

Before we end section two, as we come to its climax we're going to meet one of these geometrical prepositions again. And there is no doubt what it means there.

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing *before the throne* and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!' And all the angels were standing *round the throne* and round the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces *before the throne* and worshipped God, saying, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.' Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?' I said to him, 'Sir, you know.' And he said to me, 'These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are *before the throne* of God, and serve him day and night in his temple . . .' (7:9–15)

'They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are . . .' Where are they? Ah, 'before the throne'. Oh, ladies and gentlemen, that's not merely impressionism; that is the statement of your glorious salvation.

You say, 'What does it mean, "before the throne"? Are they all lined up in battalions?'

Well, it's not like that. It starts with the geometrical thing, 'before the throne'. But then the local preposition begins to take on tremendous meaning. What does it mean, to stand before the throne? Listen to Ephesians, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless *before him*' (1:3–4). That's a glorious preposition, isn't it?

What a ton of theology is in that preposition. You and I were feeble and frail sinners and rebels against the throne. We deserved to stand among those who will call on the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of him who sits on the throne (6:15–17). And yet there shall be a vast multitude who stand before it in peace and security. How can it be done? Says the elder, ‘They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. *Therefore they are before the throne of God*’ (7:14–15).

If the preposition there is more than just local and geometric, but expressive of some fundamental truth of the gospel, it might be worth trying to make sense of these prepositions when they are used to describe the throne. And, of course, the nature of the throne means the nature of its government. It’s an idea to work on, but let’s take a break first.

Other Descriptions of the Throne

When we broke off in our last session, we were debating among ourselves the significance of the imagery that is used to describe the throne of God in Revelation 4. We suggested that perhaps it's just impressionism, but on the other hand we found one little idea in chapter 7 that suggests that this description has a deeper theological meaning.

On that presupposition, I'd like to look with you now at the geometrical descriptions of the throne of God in chapter 4, and I'm going to suggest that they do indeed hold a deeper theological meaning. The rainbow round about the throne is, presumably, vertical, and the twenty-four thrones are, presumably, horizontal. Two concentric circles. If we maintain that geometrical idea, then anything that comes out of that throne must pass the two circles: the vertical plain 'bounded' by the rainbow, and the horizontal plain 'bounded' by these twenty-four other thrones. In using that term, I may already have overstepped the mark.

You say, 'Wait a minute, my good sir, you're not going to say that the throne of almighty God is *bounded* by anything, are you? I thought this was the throne of the almighty, self-existent sovereign of the universe. Nothing binds him.'

No, of course not; except if he chooses to bind himself, which he has a right to do. This is the throne from which the judgments are to proceed, described as 'flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder' (4:5). In the imagery they exit from the throne, so they must pass through these two circles. In that sense they are setting boundaries.

The rainbow around the throne (v. 3)

We've gone beyond geometry here, because now we have an Old Testament allusion. The first one in Scripture is in Genesis, after the flood, and it was God's guarantee that there would be no more flood. God has limited himself, then! When it comes to judgment, God put the rainbow in the sky to assure Noah that, whatever else he did, he would never again destroy the earth by a flood—God himself was limiting his judgments. What a magnificent statement of theology that is, and you can rest secure just now because God does limit his judgments. That is the nature of God.

If the rainbow causes us to think, first of all, of God's physical judgment on our planet, then we surely are allowed to extend the notion to the magnificence of the grace of God who addresses us in the person of his Son, whom he appointed to be the judge. 'Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgement' (John 5:24). That's more than impressionism, isn't it? If God was concerned only for his justice, he would have consumed us all long since, but he has limited

his judgment and wants us to know that ‘there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:1).

It was said of Lot that he was a righteous man (2 Pet 2:8). He had compromised and gone grievously astray, yet basically he was a man of faith. As the angels came to drag him and his wife out of Sodom city, they said, ‘Get out, Lot, come on. God can do nothing until you are out’ (see Gen 19:15–22). The limitations on God’s judgment were set by his own merciful decision and decree.

The twenty-four thrones around the throne (v. 4)

There is another circle on a different plain, the horizontal plain. ‘Round the throne,’ says John, ‘I saw twenty-four thrones, occupied, if you please, by elders.’

‘Ah,’ you say, ‘that’s the one point in the book we’re interested in: who are the elders? If you don’t pass muster there, Mr Preacher, you can pack your bags and go home. Do you agree with us as to who the elders are?’

I’m not going to tell you. Isn’t that frustrating! Often in the book of Revelation we ask the wrong questions first, don’t we? We want to know who they are, but if it were of first importance that we should know who they are, the Holy Spirit would have said. It’s marvellous how we get dogmatic over things that the Holy Spirit hasn’t said. Watch preachers, and this one in particular! They are very often most sure that their interpretation is right when the Holy Spirit hasn’t said what the interpretation is. What we are told is not *who* they are, but *what* they are, and there’s enough in that fact to keep us going for a very long time.

This is the throne of almighty God, the sole ruler of the universe. Why are there other thrones around his throne, and what are they there for? Is it for decoration, or are they real thrones? ‘They’re occupied,’ says John, ‘with elders.’ Well, this much is certain, those elders must be creatures, mustn’t they? Can you believe this: creatures sharing the government of God? Tell me, are they real? Have they got real power, or are they merely puppets? They’ve got golden crowns on. Does it represent any reality? What do you think?

I reckon, if we’d been painting the throne, we’d never have dared to say there were other thrones sharing the government of God, but it’s the fact. Almighty as he is, the Sovereign of the universe has chosen to delegate power at various levels throughout his creation. Listen to Scripture describing the great beings that inhabited the heavens in God’s original creation: angels, principalities, powers, mights, dominions—each term indicating rule and authority.

I can go one better than that in my exposition. If I examined your heart deeply enough, I fancy I should find you are hoping that one of these days you are going to share the government of the universe with God. We are reliably told, ‘If we endure, we shall also reign with him’ (2 Tim 2:12). But don’t think merely of your glory, think of the character of God who designed it. If you’d been the sovereign ruler of the universe, would you have delegated your authority to any of us?

You say, ‘Who are these elders?’ I told you, I’m not going to tell you. But I know that, without exception, all of those who shall reign with Christ started off by being rebels against the throne of God. If we had the time to shut our books, this magnificent thing alone would lead us to start worshipping the God of the universe. Satan has done his worst to represent

God's rule as that of an almighty tyrant. But that is not so—round about the throne, there were other thrones.

We are told about the two circles before we're told about the things that come out of the throne. If you follow in the book that hint of the voices and lightning and thunders that come out of the throne, you'll find that they herald the coming judgments of God. But the things that come out must pass through the limitation of the two plains, putting a limit to God's judgments. I don't know whether I ought to use the word 'limit', but every judgment that comes out of that throne must pass through a circle of other thrones occupied by creatures. They are of perfect personal righteousness, their garments are white and their standards of government are pure gold (v. 4), but they are creatures, and not a judgment will come out of that throne that shall not agree with the central throne.

Of course, this principle of God's judgment is seen at a much higher level by the appointment of our blessed Lord as judge. 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son' (John 5:22). Why? Not because he is the Son of God: 'And he has given him authority to execute judgement, because he is the *Son of Man*' (5:27). God believes in judgment by peer. When at last human beings stand before the great white throne to be judged, they shall be judged by a man, Christ Jesus. God is no tyrant; what a magnificent governor of the universe he is.

I submit to you that the geometrical prepositions are not here just for impressionism; they too carry their theological implications.

The burning torches and the sea of glass (vv. 5-6)

THE SEVEN TORCHES

'*Before the throne* were burning seven torches of fire'. These aren't oil lamps, they are torches.⁸ '*And before the throne* there was as it were a sea of glass'. This is another pair, described in chiasmic pattern. What will they represent, and what does the phrase 'before the throne' mean here?

It might be helpful to look at descriptions of other people's thrones in holy Scripture. Solomon was some potentate, and if you went to visit him you'd find him sitting on his throne. Do you know what he had before his throne? Lions! A common motif for monarchs in the ancient world. The kings sat on their big thrones, and up the steps of the throne were lions on each side. Were they there merely for artistry? I think not. They were there to impress everyone of the power of the throne.

The king also made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with the finest gold. The throne had six steps, and at the back of the throne was a calf's head, and on each side of the seat were armrests and two lions standing beside the armrests, while twelve lions stood there, one on each end of a step on the six steps. The like of it was never made in any kingdom. (1 Kgs 10:18-20)

⁸ Greek: *lampas*, Latin: *lampades*.

Some of these monarchs—not Solomon, we hope, but Nebuchadnezzar and Darius—not only had imitation lions, they had some very real lions in cages round the corner. They kept them starved, ready for anybody who should offend His Majesty. The lions were before the throne, to indicate the power of the throne. Our Lord is later seen as the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5). It's a kingly title. What will God impress us with here, if that's what he's doing with his power?

You say, 'It's a little disappointing. It's just seven torches. Would they impress anybody with power?'

Well, they're torches and they are certainly burning like old-fashioned torches did. They were chunks of wood wrapped in a rag and soaked in oil. You lit the oil and when you went through the night streets, the burning flames came out of the top and you could see wherever you were going. The purpose of the fire was not to burn you up, but to give you light. So these torches are burning and they're giving light. Do you know what the power is on this throne? Well, you know at once that it certainly isn't 'the power of darkness.' It is the very opposite: the power of light. That's very important. When God says that he's delivered us from *the power of darkness* through Christ, he's describing the devil's domain (Col 1:13 KJV).

You'll meet the same phrase in Luke's Gospel, in his description of Gethsemane.

While he was still speaking, there came a crowd, and the man called Judas, one of the twelve, was leading them. He drew near to Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus said to him, 'Judas, would you betray the Son of Man with a kiss?' And when those who were around him saw what would follow, they said, 'Lord, shall we strike with the sword?' And one of them struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, 'No more of this!' And he touched his ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests and officers of the temple and elders, who had come out against him, 'Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? When I was with you day after day in the temple, you did not lay hands on me. *But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.*' (22:47–53)

He pointed out to them, 'I'm not running away. But it is odd that you've come with swords and clubs at the dead of night. Why didn't you take the opportunity when I was in the temple, and arrest me in daylight? I was there at your fingertips; why didn't you arrest me then?' It was because the crowds were hanging on to his words. He wasn't teaching political subversion.

So they came to him in the temple courts with a trick question:

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard it, they marvelled. And they left him and went away. (Matt 22:15–22)

If he'd said, 'Yes, pay the tax', his popularity with the crowd would go. They wanted Jesus to lead them against the Romans. If he'd said, 'No, don't pay the tax', they'd have gone to Pilate, and he would have been arrested before he got out of the temple gate. They thought they had him both ways, but they daren't arrest him themselves because of the people. There would have been an uproar. So what did they do? They arrested him at night. Yes, but not just at night. They came with a band of soldiers, if you please, to catch twelve men. Why did they bring soldiers and all that paraphernalia? 'Have you come out as against a robber?' says Christ. It was a deliberate sham so that they could get him to Caesar, charged with political subversion.

When he was brought before Pilate, 'they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king"' (Luke 23:2). And poor old Peter came near to putting his foot in it, didn't he? The devil nearly succeeded in his plot when Peter drew his sword to cut off a man's head. If Peter had succeeded the devil would have laughed. He wanted Christ to be caught in a situation where there was political strife, and one of his followers could be accused of starting a war. Lies and falsehood: that's the power of darkness. God's power is light. He never rules by keeping you in the dark.

I've known some people to be afraid of science. I was afraid of it because I hadn't the brains for it, but that's another story. Some people say, 'Do you think you ought to investigate as far as that?' Well, as far as I know, you can look down your powerful microscope and keep on looking, and you'll never come across a notice that says, 'Trespassers will be prosecuted beyond here.' God isn't afraid of light. He doesn't rule you by keeping you in the dark; he rules you by flooding you with light and telling you the truth.

Christendom hasn't always understood the principle, and for centuries unreformed Christendom forbade people to have the Bible. They ruled by keeping them in the dark. Our Lord's techniques are the opposite, 'I am the light of the world . . . If you abide in my word . . . you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (John 8:12, 31-32). This is the power of light, but it's a burning light and you have to be very careful how you handle it. The light of God's truth will burn up perversity.

THE SEA OF GLASS

What does it symbolize, if anything? It ought also to illustrate the power of God. The imagery is complex. At the first level, if you're talking about the heavenly tabernacle with its throne, incense altar, and big altar, then, if you use the term 'sea', it will conjure up in your mind the great laver in Solomon's temple, borne on the backs of twelve oxen. It was so large it was called the 'sea'. It may be that in the heavenly temple John is seeing the equivalent of the sea in Solomon's earthly temple. As some have suggested, it may also be a symbol of the real sea and the way it is used in Scripture of the nations: 'But the wicked are like the tossing sea; for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up mire and dirt' (Isa 57:20).

However, this sea before this throne is certainly not troubled waters, and there's no mire underneath. It is as pure as crystal. A whole bunch of ideas could gather there: the power of this throne is in its purity; the power of this throne is such that it is able to calm the troubled sea. The power of this throne is exercised by one who calmed the wind and wave on the literal sea of Tiberias (Matt 8:26).

But deeper than that, the wicked are like the troubled sea, and we were among them once, brothers and sisters. What a churn up of old emotions and powers and motives we have. It would be gospel, wouldn't it, if God had a power that could cleanse us from all impurity and make our lives a sea with a surface like a mirror to reflect the image and the glory of God? Writing to Titus, Paul says:

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (3:3–7)

What a magnificent *laver*! The power of the Spirit, not only to reveal the truth—that's the objective side, to reveal the mind and the law of God—but his ability to purify and cleanse. Some at last are seen, standing by the crystal sea in the triumph of God's power. Old Sankey had it somewhere near right; the imagery is not far off. Talking of our great salvation, the purifying powers of the Holy Spirit, and regeneration, he helped us to see that one day we shall stand by the glassy sea.

Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me,
Sing it with the saints in glory,
Gathered by the crystal sea.⁹

The living creatures (vv. 6–11)

These are not beasts. There are plenty of beasts elsewhere in the Revelation. They are wild beasts, but these are 'living ones', *zōon* is the word. In Ezekiel 10, where they are pictured underneath the throne of God, carrying that throne, it is said explicitly that these living creatures are the *cherubim*.

You say, 'Well, now you have a chance to redeem yourself, Mr Lecturer. Tell us who the living creatures are. Are they the church, or who are they?'

There you are again, wanting to know *who*, and for the moment I can't answer your question. It's easier to answer *what* they are. They are living creatures. Isn't the Bible simple! Why is God's throne seen to be resting on living creatures? Well, I can tell you one innocent answer: it's because he is the living God.

Have you observed how God runs his universe? To take a simple example, when he wants an apple tree to bear apples, he doesn't send a note down from heaven, 'Tree, bear some apples.' No, how he gets trees to bear apples is to give them apple life, with all the information in the genes, and the life surging up the wood produces apples.

He is the living God who governs by giving life, and all kinds of information and pattern-setting genes with it. Life is a magnificent thing. How would you describe it in its multifarious

⁹ Francis H. Rowley (1854-1952), 'I will sing the wondrous story' (1886); alt. by Ira D. Sankey, 1887.

forms? The cherubim are described in a variety of ways in different parts of Scripture. Here they have four heads, one each. Sometimes each cherub was said to have four heads. I personally don't think that there are angels flying around heaven with four heads on. There could be, I suppose. We'll see when we get there. But here they have four heads and are expressive of four different kinds of life.

The first was like a lion, and the second like an ox. Two different kinds of life in the animal kingdom: a lion with its kingly ferociousness, and an ox with its patient strength. Then there's a living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth like an eagle in flight (Rev 4:7). On the whole, I think my life is better than a lion's, though I sometimes admire his power; and when I've got a few enemies around I'd like his paws! Why can't I be entrusted with power like a lion? Why waste that on him? Eagles haven't got a lot of sense in their heads, but I sometimes wish I could be an eagle and fly. Perhaps you don't? You're content to be human. But mankind hasn't every kind of life, and God is the God of life of all kinds. So, these living creatures are underneath his throne, and he is the God of life; how does he govern?

Well, let's press the theology and the doctrine, and come to still higher levels. How does he govern you, sir?

'Well, my story is this. God came to me like he came to the Israelites, and wrote his laws on stones, clearly enough to read, and put them in a box in his throne. They were written with authority by the finger of God. But in the end, it didn't work.'

Why didn't it work?

'Well,' you say, 'it's not enough to have laws written on tables of stone. I read them and knew what I ought to do, but I hadn't the puff to do it. When it told me not to do something, I hadn't the power to stop myself. God could write on as many tables as he liked, but it didn't work with me as it should have done.'

How God governs us

God had another scheme. 'And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts' (2 Cor 3:3). A great metaphor for the great work of his Spirit, writing the laws on our hearts. How did God do it? When God gave us his Spirit, he gave us a form of life that carries with it all the powers, longings, and qualities of his Holy Spirit. He's given us a life, hasn't he? And that's how he governs us. If we won't behave, he has laws to deal with us, and he will chastise us. But his main principle of governing us is to give us—and I say it with bated breath—his own very life. He is the living God, and the magnificent, almost incredible, story of the gospel is that he governs his redeemed people by putting in them, begetting in them, his own life and the life of his Son.

That is how I would begin to come at this description of the throne in Revelation 4. I am probably inexact and wrong in many details, but I leave it with you. I do feel in my bones that it's not just impressionism; the geometrical phrases are meant to carry theological implications.

The creatorial rights of the throne

What is the thought-flow going through section two, that is, chapters 4–7, to its great climax at the end of chapter 7? The minor climaxes will sum up the stages in the thought-flow.

At the end of chapter 4, the elders and the living creatures sing the praise of him that sits upon the throne, and from their praise you observe it is the creatorial throne that they're talking about. 'Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, *for you created all things*, and by your will they existed and were created' (v. 11). This is the throne of the Creator and he's worthy to receive all the honour and revenues that come from creation because he made it. And not only because he made it, but the reason why he made it. He made it for himself. He had a right to, didn't he? He made it for himself, and he's worthy to receive the revenues of all his creation.

The problem is that creation at various levels has gone its own way. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa 53:6).

Years ago, just after the war when rations were scarce, I was travelling on a train going up through the north of England to that great bright civilization in Scotland. Anyway, opposite me sat a young gentleman; he had some sandwiches and I had some tea, so we shared them. We got talking and the talk came round, of course, to salvation.

He said, 'Sin is a silly concept. I don't believe in sin, and all that kind of talk.'

'Don't you really? That's interesting.' Changing the subject, I said, 'Suppose you were able to make a motorcar. When you got behind the wheel, only one time out of ten it went where you wanted it to go, but nine times in ten you could tug on the wheel as much as you liked, and it went where it wanted to go itself and took no notice of you. What would you do?'

'Oh,' he said, 'I wouldn't have that.'

I said, 'Wait a minute, be reasonable. If only five times out of ten it went where you wanted it, but five times out of ten it went where it wanted to go itself, what would you do?'

He said, 'I'd scrap it.'

'If only one time out of ten it went where it wanted to go itself, what would you do?'

He said, 'I should still scrap it. If I made a motorcar, I would insist it went where I wanted it to go every time.'

I said, 'I thought so. God made you to do his will, and he says we have turned every one to his own way. That's you as well, and if you're not careful he'll put you on the scrapheap of the universe.'

That's why the judgments must come. Why do the judgments of the Revelation come? They start with the throne, of course, and it's creatorial rights. The only way the universe will be made to work sensibly is if it is brought back to serve the will and purpose of the one who made it. If men will not repent, the only way the world can be brought back is by God's intervening judgment. But that raises a very big moral problem: who is worthy to execute the judgment?

That's why the cry goes out in Revelation 5. There was a book in the hand of him who sat upon the throne, written inside and out, and sealed with many seals. Once those seals are opened, the judgments will begin, but who's worthy to take it and open it?

You say, 'God is. Why doesn't he get at it?'

And there you meet the magnificence of God. He has all power to do the judgment, and every right. Then why doesn't he? Because the ultimate question in the universe is not, who has the biggest power? The ultimate moral judgment is, who has the biggest love and loyalty?

A God who, without asking permission, made a creature and brought it into the world, and was not loyal to that creature, would be an immoral God.

If as parents you bring a child into the world, you don't ask the child's permission, do you? You bring it into the world. Does that not create in you a moral responsibility for that child, and will you not be loyal to that child to the last? A God who could create human beings, bring them into the world and not be loyal to them, would be seriously defective morally. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is not just power; the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is love. Before he brings his judgments, even upon an aberrant world, he will be loyal to them.

Who is worthy to take the book?

The judgment is committed to a human being. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah. He's human, then, of the line of King David, so he's a king.

You say, 'He's very powerful, so he'll see the judgments carried out. 'Look out, you evil men'; he'll only have to start roaring and wielding his paws.

John turned to see this lion, and he saw a Lamb. A Lamb? Yes, a Lamb that had been slain. What, a Lamb is going to execute these judgments? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? The Lamb had seven horns, and horns speak of power in anybody's symbolism. This is the power of the Lamb. Has the Lamb any power? What's the difference between a lamb's power and a lion's power? This is not just the Lion, it's the Lamb of Cavalry who will unloose the seals and start the judgments.

How is he worthy to do this? Well, precisely because he is 'the Lamb who was slain' (5:12), and this world would not be able to complain that it's unfair. The one who will deluge the world in judgment to bring it back to God first died, so that no one needs to perish and a rebel world might be brought back to God. Not only forgiven, pardoned, and made eternally secure, but made into something: 'you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God . . . and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God' (5:9-10). He not only turned us from rebels into willing, loyal, obedient servants in his kingdom, but he has made us priests.

Therein lies his moral worth to do it. No one shall be able to find fault with the Lamb of Calvary if they perish under God's judgments, because he died so that they might be saved. But there's more to it, isn't there? What would you think of a God who created a whole universe, and when it went wrong, he said, 'I'm tired of this, remove it completely and we'll start again'?

That might sound reasonable to us, but it would have been a defeat. Satan could then have said to God, 'I always knew you had almighty power, but I've defeated you. You made a beautiful world and you thought it was lovely, but I came along and ruined it. You couldn't put it right and you had to destroy your world. I've won and you've lost.'

God doesn't propose to be defeated. He's not going to scrub it all out as a failure. He has a man who not only died so that sinners might be redeemed and rebels converted and changed, brought back to God and pardoned, but he has the genius to take once-time rebels, and make them something for God to be a witness to God's almighty triumph. Planet Earth will not be an unmitigated disaster and failure; Christ is going to make it glorious for God.

That is a thought-flow of the passage. Christ, the Lamb, takes the book because he has the moral authority to do so. If the judgments come and some perish, they didn't need to, but the world can't be allowed to go on like it is for ever. It's got to be brought back to serve the Creator. The gospel is that once-time rebels willingly serve the Creator. You do, don't you? I'm not talking imaginary stuff. We were rebels, so why do we serve God now? Not because we're forced to, not even out of fear of hell. We serve him now, like Philippians 2 has it, in the name of Jesus: 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (vv. 10–11).

So the judgments come with more and more intensity as the seals are unloosed, and human wickedness is allowed to have its head in the form of war, with the inevitable results of bloodshed, famine, and plague.

You say, 'Is that God's fault?'

One of God's methods of judgment is to say, 'If you will not repent, and insist on having your own way, I'll let you go.' At the moment there is a restraint (2 Thess 2:6), but God sometimes judges by letting men and women have their way and find out by experience where it leads. However, as the judgments come to their crescendo, the heavens are rolled away, and when they see the throne of God and the Lamb they call to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?' (Rev 6:16–17).

And now the commentators say, 'We are near the end of the seals. This is number six, number seven won't come for a while, so chapter 7 is a parenthesis.'

So, just when we thought we were coming to something interesting, a climax of the thought-flow, alas, we've got a parenthesis.

You say, 'But, Mr Preacher, you've got to tell us who these 144,000 are in verse 4.'

You do like that question, don't you? *Who* are they? Well, you'll have to have mercy on us elementary schoolboys; we've only got round to thinking *what* they are. You can tell me who they are later on, and how they are different from this great multitude in verse 9.

When I've done my elementary talk about the literary side of the book of the Revelation, then the systematic theologians will talk about dispensations and all such wonderful things, and get the ages and everything settled. I'm pointing out what the text says, and how it's put together as it stands, the systematic theologians will tell you who the 144,000 are, who the great multitude are, and what dispensation they belong to.

Two groups who experience salvation

What does chapter 7 say? Is there salvation for anybody against the judgments of God? It tells us that there are two groups of people who experience the salvation of God: those who are sealed (v. 4), and those who have been saved (v. 14). The sealed, and then the saved: two sides of salvation.

The sealed: Revelation 7:1–8

Before the seventh seal is opened (ch. 8), the four angels are commanded ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads’ (7:3).

The six seals were but preparatory warnings, like the plagues on Pharaoh. The seventh is different; it introduces the great day of God’s wrath. That’s a very different thing. The plagues under Pharaoh were meant to lead Pharaoh to repentance, but when he finally hardened his heart and wouldn’t repent, there came the last, the tenth, plague. There was no salvation from that.

Before the great day of wrath comes, ‘Wait a minute,’ says God, ‘seal these. Nothing must touch them.’

Who are they? That is an important question. I repeat, you must decide who they are; but at the basic level, it illustrates a vast and beautiful principle of salvation. They’re sealed against any suffering of the wrath of God. Whoever these 144,000 are, my brother and sisters, don’t you feel a kindred spirit in your heart with them? The principles of salvation are common to all God’s people, of all times. We’ve been sealed against suffering the wrath of God, and no child of God, no believer in God, shall ever suffer the wrath of God.

That’s basic gospel: you shall not come into judgment (John 5:24). ‘For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Thess 5:9). When you start thinking about prophecy, ‘put on . . . for a helmet the hope of salvation’ (v. 8), for God has not appointed you to wrath. Not one iota of the wrath of God shall ever touch a genuine believer, and that’s true of all believers of every dispensation. Do say ‘Amen!’

The saved: Revelation 7:9–17

Coming victoriously through the great tribulation, this great multitude cry with a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’ (v. 10). What is the ground of their salvation, and what will their salvation involve? Well, let’s read it once more:

These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are *before the throne of God* . . . (vv. 14–15)

That is the basis of their *standing*. You say, ‘But they’re not in heaven, are they? This is an earthly people.’ Whether they’re on earth or in heaven, notice their theological standing. They are ‘before the throne.’ It’s not just a question of local position, being before him and standing in his presence. As distinct from those who call upon the rocks to cover them, these stand before the throne, *accepted*.

Now some lovely things are said relevant to creation, ‘they . . . serve him day and night in his temple [so they’re in his temple]; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat’ (vv. 15–16). What a marvellous promise.

You’ll notice that the description is in terms of the created powers of the universe—no hunger, no thirst, neither shall the sun strike them, nor any scorching heat. It’s no good hiding our eyes from the fact that creation has hurt a lot of people, and not merely by physical sunstroke. This is a broken creation, and it’s not just physical thirst that has tormented people,

but a deeper thirst. Nature cries out to have its proper desire satisfied, but when life doesn't satisfy, it creates an almost intolerable thirst; wind and wave and sun causing death and disablement and disease. Creation has hurt people, for it's a broken world.

Salvation will not only protect us from the wrath of God, but one day he who sits on the throne will shelter his redeemed people with his presence. The sun won't hurt them any more; neither shall they thirst any more. The one who made the universe will gear it towards their blessing and none of the powers of the universe will hurt them.

That's not a fairy story, ladies and gentlemen. That hope is based on the fact that the God of the universe gave his Son as the Lamb to die for us, and the Lamb is now in the midst of the throne. You see, we're still with John up in heaven, and the vision is going on. It doesn't reach its conclusion until here.

In chapter 5, the Lamb is described as being in the midst of the throne and in the midst of the twenty-four elders, which is a Hebraism for saying he is between the elders and the throne. 'In the midst of the throne' is an exceedingly important theological statement (v. 6 KJV). It's not just that it has absolute power, but in the very centre of the throne of God is the principal of redemption through the Lamb. Who is Jesus Christ, this Lamb? He's not just a superior angel, he is God incarnate. Jesus Christ is God; and the man of Calvary, the Lamb slaughtered, that is what God is like. He tells out the heart of the government of the universe. Almighty, yes: all authority given to him now in heaven and in earth, he remains the Lamb of God, and when his redeeming work is done, he shall lead his redeemed people.

For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (v. 17)

He shall lead them to the source of all the inexhaustible fountains, pure and undefiled, that will quench the thirst of every redeemed person the universe through, and fulfil the role of the Shepherd King. According to Psalm 23, 'He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters . . . for his name's sake' (Ps 23:2-3). And 'he will wipe away every tear from their eyes' (Rev 21:4).

That's an attempt to trace the thought-flow through the second section of the Revelation. I would argue that we ought to take the book as it stands; watch its thought-flow and its patterns; watch its climaxes, the minor ones and then the major one each time; and follow the theme through. That is *thematic* interpretation. I stress again, I'm not saying it replaces *systematic*. The systematic theologians too will insist upon the principles of salvation and redemption being the same throughout all ages. So the first step in the process is to get the theme and the principles right.

I want to make just one or two finishing comments. If you care to look back at your sheet of contents, if this scheme is right there are six major sections to the book. That is the structure, and then we observed that there were patterns emerging.

You have column one, followed by two related columns: sections two and three are related. Look at the tabernacle furniture: the throne in section two, the incense altar in section three. As we saw earlier, they are functionally related.

Then we have sections four and five. They too are related: section four mirrors section two. Section two is God's throne and section four is the beast's throne: Satan's great imitation and opposition.

Then in section three we have the smoke going up in the tabernacle and the temple from the altar of incense in the Holy Place, and in five the smoke is going up in the Most Holy Place. It is God's answer as he begins to express his glory and the reality of his presence as he visits the world and its iniquity with his judgment, in answer to the prayers of the saints.

So you can take those two pairs, sections two and three being one pair; sections four and five, the other pair; and you say, 'Well, there's a great deal of correspondence between them.'

If you do that, you should remember what someone said here the other day about the difference between pattern and structure, 'patterns are complicated things.' There can be one series of patterns, like the wedding in Cana of Galilee, which was the first member in a series of signs. If we had more time to look at them, we should see why they are a coherent series. If we look at John's Gospel another way, the wedding at Cana becomes the first of another series of stories in which women are prominent. No other Gospel has them. These are patterns.

You say, 'This is getting too complicated.'

Some people don't like complications, and I normally don't. There's one area where I love complications. Suppose I get a notice from my solicitor, saying, 'Your Uncle Joe in America has just died and you've been left something in his will . . .'. So I hurry along to the solicitor, and I'm all ears.

The solicitor starts, 'Your Uncle Joe liked you.'

I say, 'Yes, I know he did. Come on, get on with it.'

'Well,' he says, 'he's left you his house.'

'Good. Any more?'

'Yes, he's left you his private ranch.'

'Oh, that's marvellous. Any more?'

'Yes, he's left you his private aeroplane.'

'Marvellous. I don't know where I shall keep it.'

'And he's left you his ocean-going yacht.'

I say, 'Pile it on, solicitor, go on.'

'He's left you certain indentures, and then there are first preference shares.'

Do I say, 'Now, look here, I don't like complicated things; cut all that out and keep it simple?'

No, I don't! I say, 'I don't know what you're talking about, but keep going! The more complicated you make it, the more I like it. Shares, indentures, first preference bonds, futures, share options—make it complicated.' You can see my motivation, can't you? I like the wealth of it all.

I thank God that he's made the Bible complicated, and heaven is going to be massively complicated. Even if we don't understand it, we can enjoy the prospect of the Lord opening our eyes, as we can bear it, to see what it all means. Scripture is written by inspiration of God

and on the surface it's marvellously simple; a child could understand its prominent points. Underneath it is written with divine sophistication, and that is the evidence of its inspiration. A daisy is simple, a little child of two can make a daisy crown. Ask the biologist and the botanist, and finally the physicist, to tell you about a daisy, and it's colossally complicated. So is Scripture.

So you must expect patterns that are all intertwined. If you look at it this way, there's a pattern; start at the same point and look that way, and there's another pattern. It's nothing to do with structure, it's pattern.

Let's look at another pattern before we cease

Sections one, two and three are in the first half of the book (1:1–11:18); sections four, five and six in the second half (11:19–22:21).

In section 1, you'll notice the reference to the Son of Man and the lampstands. In his hand he held seven stars and his face shone as the sun (1:16). He was a man, of course, surrounded by the lampstands.

When you come to section 4 (11:19–15:4), everybody knows that there is no series of judgments here, so it's a parenthesis! Oh, really? But just as in the first section there is the great vision of the Son of Man with his churches, his face glowing like the sun, and in his hand seven stars, lo and behold, the fourth section starts off with a woman, 'clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars' (12:1). What's all that about? She is described as being with child, and about to be delivered (12:2). Before her stands the old dragon, ready to gobble up her son before he is born.

References to women

It is to be noticed, of course, that, once the subject of women is introduced in section four, the fifth section is about two women (17:3, 18). And when you get to the climax, there's a third woman (18:2). When you come to the final section there's another woman, and she happens also to be a city (21:2). She's the bride of the Lamb, of course. As far as themes go, you will see the second half of the Revelation lays tremendous emphasis on women, and every Christian woman will want to know why.

Allusions

Now, I wish I had time to talk to you about allusions. Throughout the Revelation, as in the Gospel of John, there are scores of allusions. Let me take an early one. Writing to the church at Ephesus, our blessed Lord says, 'To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God' (2:7). 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent' (v. 5). A promise, then, of eating of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

You say, 'That's heaven, isn't it?'

Yes, you've got it right, more or less. And when you come to the end of the Revelation, you see the city, and the river, and the tree of life:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. (22:1–2)

That's marvellous. But if you happened to have read it in Greek, you will know that the Greek translation of the garden of Eden in Genesis is *paradeisos, paradise*. In it there were two trees, and one of them was the tree of life. When Adam and Eve sinned, they got put out of the garden so that they could not put out their hands and eat of the tree of life. They were turned out until they turned back to the dust. They fell, you know. Says Christ to the church at Ephesus:

Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. . . .
To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
(2:5, 7)

'Make sure you repent,' he says, 'for if you don't, I shall come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.' He removed Adam out of his place, so that he and Eve should not eat of the tree of life. And now one becomes aware that, as well as being a symbol and pointing forward, this is an allusion to the Old Testament. If you didn't know the Old Testament, you wouldn't see the allusion; but if you did, that's an added level of meaning and Revelation is full of it.

A woman with her offspring, and the old dragon waiting to devour him (12:1–4). Did you ever hear anything else like that in the Bible? A woman and a promised seed? Most people have. When Satan tempted the woman and she fell, God said to the serpent, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (Gen 3:15). And so, before the beast arises and Satan gives him his tremendous power, God takes us behind the scenes by an allusion to Old Testament history, to help us see what's involved. It is a marvellous story.

Look at that woman, about to give birth. Who's the woman? But, more important, who's the child? Satan is about to launch on earth his last attempt to foster man's absolute insanity. He has put it into the heads of the masses that *man* can be as God. You don't need God; man will be God. A man will sit upon the throne. Satan will give him his supernatural power, and they shall cry, 'Who is like God.' Will they? No, they won't. They'll cry 'Who is like the beast?' (13:4)

'Who is like the LORD our God?' asks the psalmist (Ps 113:5). Nobody is; he is unique. But they'll say in blasphemy, 'Who is like the beast? He is unique.' They'll bow down to the beast, and deify man, and Satan will give him his throne. 'You will be like God'—isn't that what Satan said to Eve? (see Gen 3:5).

God's plan of redemption

And what will heaven do when puny man is trying to be God? How will God counteract that? Says God, 'Before that happens, let me tell you what I'm going to do. Look at that woman; she's carrying a child, isn't she? Who is the child? Satan wanted man to try and be God, so I decided to become man myself. This is my plan that none of the princes of this world knew.' Oh, the strategy and the wisdom of our God. (See 1 Cor 2:6–8; 1:24–25.)

Satan holds out all his glittering prizes for people who will follow him, but he says, 'If you don't follow me, and take my mark on your right hand or your forehead, you won't be able

to buy or sell anything. If you will fall down and worship me I'll reward you with every material thing you like, but if you don't, you won't be able to eat.'

Says God, 'I shall enter the market, I shall become man, and buy them.'

How will he buy them? As John is shown a great company following the Lamb, he says that they were singing a new song: 'Worthy are you . . . for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation' (5:9). The apostle uses the straight Greek word for *buying*; not even *redemption*, but *bought*.

And in the marketplace, God has outbid Satan. I don't know whether you like that idea, but I have to point out to you, ladies and gentlemen, that God has bought you. He had to capture your heart somehow, and when Satan was offering his great bribe, 'You will be like God', God had to offer a bigger price to get your heart's allegiance. He didn't promise you riches; he didn't promise you gold or silver, or a brilliant career. The price he paid to buy you was the blood of his Son.

Jesus, Thou hast bought us,
Not with gold or gem,
But with thine own life-blood,
For Thy diadem.¹⁰

Why do you follow the Lamb wherever he goes? What is the secret, and why do you do it?

'Well, I've been bought,' you say.
Yes, and at what a price.

So when you come to the Revelation, do look at the allusions. They help us to see not only in the past, but what will go on in the future. Notice the pattern, starting with the woman in chapter 12, going on to the false women in chapters 17–18, and ending up in chapter 21 with that glorious vision of the true man with his true woman. That's really where we started—the Son of Man and the lampstands. Now, at the end, it's another image of the church, which is his body, the true bride (21:9). The patterns are intertwined, aren't they?

If I've left you all confused and tired, and weary, and wondering how much more complicated is this going to be, and how can I step off, well, you can step off now because we're going to finish. But if I've created in your mind that it is richly complicated, I've done what I set out to do, and I hope it will give you an incentive to dig deeper into the wonders of God's word. Thank you for your patience.

¹⁰ Frances R. Havergal (1836-1879), 'Who is on the Lord's Side?' (1877).

About the Author

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