

The Apocalypse

*A brief literary structure of
the Book of Revelation*

David W. Gooding

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



MYRTLEFIELD
HOUSE

www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

Contents

1	‘The things that are’	3
2	‘The things that are to take place after this’	9

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Copyright © The Myrtlefield Trust, 2019

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Sometimes Dr Gooding gives his own translations or paraphrases.

This text is made available for you to read or print out for personal or church use. However, you may not publish it either in print or electronic form.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust

PO Box 2216

Belfast, N Ireland

BT1 9YR

w: www.myrtlefieldhouse.com

e: info@myrtlefieldhouse.com

Myrtlefield catalogue no: rev.050/bh

LECTURE 1

'The things that are'

The Apocalypse is frankly a difficult book. It is perhaps the most difficult of all the New Testament writings to understand and in consequence it has given rise to many conflicting and sometimes bizarre interpretations. The difficulties are many; partly they are inherent in the subject matter. Indeed, some of it may have been made deliberately obscure because it was first written to Christians suffering persecution and contained remarks that the political authorities could have construed as being anti-government.

Then again, a good deal of the information refers to the future and will probably only become intelligible to the people who are living in that day. Moreover, the book expresses its meaning largely through symbols and sometimes the symbols which are supposed to convey that meaning create their own difficulties of interpretation.

On the other hand, there is no point in exaggerating the difficulties. Sometimes people speak as if the use of apocalyptic and symbolic language implies that the book deals with mystical and poetic abstractions that cannot be defined. But we have other examples of apocalyptic language in the Bible, notably in the book of Daniel. Here there is wide use of vision and symbol and yet the things symbolised represent very definite historical people and events. For instance, the multi-metalled image in chapter 2 and Daniel's vision of the four beasts in chapter 7. These refer to very real political kingdoms and therefore the use of apocalyptic language and symbol does not necessarily mean that we are dealing with such spiritual abstractions that we cannot tie down their meaning with more or less certainty.

Then let me at once confess that it is not my aim to give a definitive exposition. What I hope to do is to demonstrate that, in spite of the complexity of detail and the obscurity of the subject matter, the book of the Apocalypse as a whole has an eminently simple literary structure that communicates the broad outlines of its basic message with comparative ease. And if I succeed, though I shall leave untouched the great mass of detail that is vital to the precision of any exposition, I shall have shown that difficulty of detail is no ground for adopting a hopeless or cynical attitude.

The book as a whole has a two-fold division. In the introduction where John is told to record his visions the phrases used are: 'Write therefore the things that you have seen, *those that are* and *those that are to take place after this*' (1:19). By this we are led to expect that we are to apply some of John's descriptions to the present—things contemporary with himself, and some of his visions will refer to the future.

The things that are

Chapters 1–3 present the vision of Christ walking among seven of his churches—actual churches, existent in John’s day. To them John writes seven letters of encouragement and correction aimed at meeting their contemporary need.

The things that are to take place after this

Chapters 4–22, on the other hand, describe things that are plainly in the future. There are three series of sevenfold judgments leading to the climax.

1. The great day of God’s wrath
2. The coming of Christ, the setting up of his kingdom and the final rebellion
3. The passing away of heaven and earth and the final judgment

These will be followed at last by the dawn of eternity, the new heavens and the new earth linked by the city of New Jerusalem.

Part 1 is the easiest section of the book to understand because in all its essentials it is similar to our own. It shows us Christ among seven actual churches. In all probability we are meant to see that these seven particular churches were representative of all the other Christian churches then in existence, and we may infer that they are also representative of all the churches of Christ at any time throughout this Christian age.

The message of this vision likewise is easy to grasp. It was given at a time of incipient persecution of the church and it proclaims the secret of the maintenance, correction and renewal of the churches. The secret is an open one, again easily grasped. The secret of the maintenance of the churches is Christ himself, risen and glorified. Here he is seen, not sitting on some exalted throne in a distant heaven but walking among his churches down here, very much on earth. In being present with his people he is fulfilling his promise, given before his departure: ‘Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (Matt 28:20). He is exercising his supreme pastoral care of his people, which is seen in a number of ways.

First of all *his letters*, which he dictates to the seven churches, show us his detailed knowledge of each group of Christians. He knows their virtues and their faults. It is very impressive to listen to his seven times repeated, ‘I know’.

- Ephesus: ‘I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance’ (2:2)
 Smyrna: ‘I know your tribulation and your poverty’ (2:9)
 Pergamum: ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith’ (2:13)
 Thyatira: ‘I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance’ (2:19)
 Sardis: ‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead’ (3:1)
 Philadelphia: ‘I know your works . . . I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name’ (3:8)

Laodicea 'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot' (3:15)

Then his care is seen in *his resources* that he offers to correct and maintain his churches. In the introductory vision we are given, in symbol, a composite picture of our Lord:

I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash round his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength. (1:12–16)

As Christ comes to address each particular church it is noticeable that he takes one or two of these features and holds them out as the encouragement that it needs. For instance, when he comes to minister to the church at Ephesus, he presents himself in these terms: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands' (2:1). Or again, when he ministers to the church in Pergamum, he says, 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword' (2:12). In writing to the church at Thyatira, 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze' (2:18). And the picture we get is that the resources necessary to maintain and renew the churches are to be found in Christ. There is enough in him for the variety of needs in all the churches. But not all the churches have the same needs all the time, so that each church in its particular need will find its complete resource in our Lord.

On each occasion the condition of renewal is Christ's call to the individual church for a response to himself. He commends their virtues, he rebukes their faults and he calls upon them to repent. He reminds them of the chastening that will be necessary if they do not repent and then, without exception, he issues a call to overcome.

This idea of *overcoming*¹ is exceedingly interesting. It is peculiarly Johannine. We find it in the Fourth Gospel, in the epistles by John, and we find it here in the Apocalypse. In the Gospel our Lord is represented as using the term, saying to his own, 'But take heart; I have overcome the world' (16:33). All those forces that Satan has combined together to draw away man's heart from God, to thrust in a wedge between man and his Creator, were levelled against Christ our Lord in his humanity here on earth. At the end of his life he was able to say, 'I have overcome the world.'

When we move on to his epistles John affirms that all believers in Christ shall likewise overcome the world. 'For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?' (1 John 5:4–5). In these verses we get the secret of our overcoming. It is achieved by those who have this vigorous, vital, personal faith in Christ, through which is communicated the very life of Christ, which

¹ Ed. In Revelation the ESV translates this term, 'conquers.' Prof Gooding uses the older, 'overcomes'.

ensures that whosoever is born of God does overcome the world. The secret is not struggling but believing.

If we may take an illustration from the Synoptic Gospels, we could quote the parable our Lord told of the Sower who went out to sow (Matt 13:3–9). Some seed fell on rocky ground and sprang up but had no root; when the sun and the storm came this seed withered away. But he told of other seeds that fell on good soil and produced grain. The same sun and wind that caused the rootless seed to wither away merely served to develop the good seed. And so, when faith is rooted and grounded in Christ, the storms of life and the serpents of temptation help the good seed to mature until it finally comes to perfection. The good seed *overcomes*.

In the book of the Apocalypse, at a time of stress and strain, our Lord presents himself to the manifold needs of his churches. He calls upon them to overcome, and the secret of their overcoming is their personal response to him. By believing in him Christ imparts and maintains in them his own divine life, which, with its inherent qualities and characteristics, enables them to overcome.

It may be worth our while looking for a moment longer at three of the seven churches, trying to concentrate our attention on the individual churches themselves. The striking thing is the individuality of each church. As we listen to Christ's descriptions of them we discover that no two churches have the same virtues or the same faults. There is a difference of development and a difference of emphasis.

Ephesus has a healthy hate (2:6). Christ commends it for hating the things that he also hates. On the other hand this church has let go its first love. By developing in one extreme and not being balanced in the other, it has fallen from its pristine state of glory.

Thyatira is commended, not for its hate but for its love (2:19). This must have been a very warm-hearted church. At the same time, it seems that in learning to be full of charity it had forgotten to hate the things that Christ hates—'you tolerate . . .' Love is not balanced by a healthy hate and consequently the Christians at Thyatira had been allowing all sorts of evil to creep in unchallenged and unrestrained.

Laodicea, the last of the seven churches, is not extreme at all (3:15). There is one area in which we ought to be extreme. That is in our zeal, which should know no limits. Christ's complaint to the church at Laodicea is that it is neither hot nor cold and he wishes that it would be at one extreme or the other.

So then, the churches show their individuality in their virtues and in their vices. Their individuality is stressed likewise in their responses. While each church is told to listen to what Christ is saying to all the others, he addresses each individually. Even within each individual church the call to renewal does not go out so much to it as a whole as to the individuals within the church. The phrase regularly repeated is, *he that overcomes*, reminding us that renewal of the whole church depends on the renewal of the individual. In Laodicea, where renewal for the whole church seemed virtually impossible, our Lord still holds out hope for the individual within it.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (3:20)

We have spoken then of the individuality of these churches. On the other hand, it would seem quite reasonable to regard these seven churches as representative of others. Seven in the language of symbolism is normally the symbol of completeness. We may presume that, in ministering to the needs of these seven representative churches, Christ indicates his ability to minister to the needs of all his churches then and now.

There is also an interesting possibility that I throw out by way of suggestion. Some theologians have thought that these seven churches are chosen in order to give a prophetic panorama of church history throughout the church age.

For instance, in the first church (Ephesus) we have a church beginning very well but losing its first love. In the Pastoral Epistles that Paul wrote towards the end of his ministry, we find a picture of churches that had once been exceedingly zealous, cooling off and becoming cold at heart, losing their first Christian zeal. In the second church (Smyrna) we find a church that is suffering, or about to suffer, grievous persecution and we know that in the apostolic age very violent persecution overtook the church.

There is another strain of evidence that suggests that these seven churches may have been chosen to give some sort of prophetic panorama of church history. In many of the letters you will find allusions to Old Testament history. In the first church there is a reference to the book of Genesis. We have a fall (v. 4); a lamp being removed from its place (v. 5), as Adam and Eve were removed from the garden; and the tree of life (v. 7). In the third church (Pergamum) the Old Testament allusion is to the book of Numbers. We have Balaam and Balak and the time when the Israelites were journeying through the wilderness (v. 14). In the fourth church (Thyatira) we have moved on a bit further with our Old Testament allusion to the period of the Kings where we read of Jezebel (v. 20), that colourful figure who exercised her baneful influence at that time.

So these allusions form a progression of Old Testament history, and they suggest—if they do no more than suggest—that the experience of the seven churches to whom our Lord was writing would prove to be the prophetic progression of experience of all the churches down this Christian age. I throw it out merely as a suggestion. I wouldn't stake my life on its truth, but it is an interesting area for investigation.

Finally, we should notice the *rewards* that Christ holds out. Or perhaps I ought to say the *inherent consequences* for those who respond to him and overcome. Presumably the blessings that Christ holds out to the overcomer sum up all the blessings available through and in Christ and through his redemptive work.

In Ephesus the tree of life (v. 7) is surely a reference to Christ holding himself before us as the source of eternal life, open to those who learn to believe. It stands in contrast to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which somehow has overwhelming fascination for us and in pursuing it we can fail to lay hold of the tree of life, which is so much more important.

In Smyrna we see that Christians who are suffering the threat of persecution are encouraged by being reminded that those who trust Christ, and through him overcome, shall not be hurt by the second death (v. 11).

In Pergamum people that were being tempted on all sides with the corrupting influences of a sinful, pagan world are encouraged by being reminded that in Christ there is hidden manna (v. 17). That is to say, by his intimate and affectionate companionship and fellowship, Christ ministers spiritual food that will more than compensate for the resistance to all those illicit temptations that the world can offer the Christian.

In Thyatira the overcomer is reminded that in the coming day he will be given authority over the nations (v. 26) and share with Christ in his rule of the world. It is held out as an encouragement, so that those who trust him shall not fall into the temptation of compromising with Christ's enemies in this present world in order to attain to temporary power here.

In Sardis we have a church full of people who profess to have life and yet have no spiritual life at all. To this church is held out the promise that those who believe in Christ and overcome by his power shall know the exhilaration of walking with Christ in a spiritual experience that progressively grows. They also shall share his intimate companionship, and he shall confess them in that spiritual world to come (3:5).

Philadelphia is a church that was marked by very little strength. It is promised that in the day to come God will perfect that weakness. Life's experience under Christ on earth will have strengthened them to become veritable pillars in the worshipping community that shall adorn Christ's presence in eternity (v. 12).

The church at Laodicea, marked by such lack of zeal and lukewarmness, is reminded that if by personal faith in Christ they learn to overcome they shall have the joy of sharing in Christ's own triumph and victory: 'You shall sit with me on my throne' (v. 21).

Let's just gather up the main point of our study. As I have said, its message is the easiest part of the book. It shows us that the secret of the maintenance of Christ's many churches is: his presence with them here on earth, his supreme pastoral care ministered to them through his Word and his apostles, his intimate, personal and individual knowledge of each church and his infinite resources to meet their needs.

And finally, the secret of renewal on our side is our personal response to the challenge of the Saviour, who so presents himself to us that we are encouraged to let our faith root itself ever more deeply in him and in his eternal resources. As we do so, we shall find his life so surging up within us that we are able to resist all the storms and temptations of life and bring forth fruit in maturity that shall last not only for this life, but for the great harvest which God is to reap eternally.

LECTURE 2

'The things that are to take place after this'

In my first lecture I pointed out that Christ, in his introductory words to the Apostle John, indicated that the vision given to him would be in two parts—'the things that are and the things that are to take place after this' (1:19). First of all, the things that are contemporary with John, and then the things in the future.

So we covered the first vision, which deals with the contemporary things. Now we come to what is in fact the larger part of the book by far. Chapters 4–22 quite clearly fulfil the second part, the future things; once again it is in two main sections:

1. The great day of God's wrath; the coming of Christ, the setting up of his kingdom and the final rebellion; the passing away of heaven and earth and the final judgment.
2. The dawn of eternity, the new heavens and the new earth linked by the city of New Jerusalem.

The judgments of God descend in three series of seven judgments each:

1. The Lamb opens *seven seals* (6:1).
2. The seven angels blow on *seven trumpets* (8:6).
3. The seven angels pour out the contents of *seven bowls* upon the earth (16:1).

Immediately we can recognise a similar pattern. The three series all have three main elements. Central in each one, of course, are the judgments themselves, but before they come we are given a *background*. We are shown a heavenly scene in which some particular article of furniture in the heavenly temple is given prominence.

The first series of judgments under the seals is described in chapter 6; but in chapters 4 and 5 we are introduced into the heavenly scene where *the throne of God* is specially brought to our notice.

The second series is described in chapter 8 where we have the beginnings of the judgments under the trumpets. First we are shown *the altar of incense* (v. 3) and half way through that series of judgments we are shown the *ark of God's covenant* (11:19).

The third series comes by the pouring out of the bowls, described in chapter 16. Before they come chapter 15 again introduces us to the background scene in heaven, and we are shown the temple of God 'filled with smoke from the glory of God' (v. 8). Angels come out having bowls that were used in the direct service of God (16:1), and in addition we are shown a great sea (v. 3). As we know, *sea* is the technical term given to *the laver* in Solomon's

temple and also to the laver which, symbolically speaking, is to be found in the temple of God in heaven.

As the judgments fall God takes us behind the scenes to show us the spiritual reasons why they must come. God is not a monster lashing out in blind uncontrollable rage. Judgment is 'his strange work' (Isa 28:21 KJV), but when it comes it will be for reasons that rational and moral beings must approve of.

There is a third common element in these three series of judgments. We not only have *the background scene* each time, which tells us why the judgment must come; not only *the judgments themselves*, which are shown to fit the crime; but after the judgments we have a third element—what we may call *the esoteric element*. It depicts examples of God's redemptive activity, how he delivers men and women by his salvation from the sin that calls down these judgments.

Let us go over these judgments in some more detail.

1. *The Lamb unlooses the seven seals of the scroll* (chs. 5–7)

The background is the throne of God, which is described in detailed symbol in chapter 4. At the end of the chapter we get a magnificent hymn of worship in which the rights of the throne are proclaimed.

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and 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, '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.' (4:9–11)

This is a simple, though magnificent, statement of the rights of the Creator to his throne. The world was made for God's pleasure (v. 11 KJV), to do his will; but it is common knowledge that the world has wandered far from this original purpose. 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way' (Isa 53:6). Since men and things were made for God's pleasure and to do his will, if they start doing their own will this self-centredness and selfishness denies the very reason for their being and is bound to end in chaos.

Chapter 5 warns us that this chaos is not allowed to go on forever. One day God will intervene to put a stop to it. For the moment he waits for men and women to find their way back to him, but he cannot rightly be expected to wait forever. Christ will come again and set up his kingdom by force, which seems to me to be entirely reasonable. God is not always going to allow his creation to be ruined and perverted by wilful, selfish, disobedient humankind. But that raises a problem. 'Who is worthy to open the scroll?' (5:2)—thereby breaking the seals to unleash this powerful judgment against the world. Notice the term, 'Who is *worthy?*' not 'Who is *able?*' Any irresponsible fool or half-hearted sadist could push the button that eventually smashes the world to smithereens. The question is not, 'Who has the power?' but 'Who is worthy?' The answer is that no one is worthy except Christ.

First, he is worthy to open the seals and set loose these judgments *because he was slain*. Men in their rebellion against God slew him. When in God's name he rises up to take possession and control of the earth no one will be able to object. They slew him; now they will own his worthiness to judge. The second ground for his worthiness is *because he has redeemed us*.

Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you [redeemed] people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.
(vv. 9–10)

It would spell nothing more than defeat if God merely wiped the world free of his wayward, self-centred creatures. Christ was slain in order to redeem men and women for God and salvage them from the earth, not only setting them free from the fear of coming judgment but free from selfishness and making them something for God. He will return them to what they ought to have been originally. *A kingdom*—people who naturally and gladly obey God and seek his will; *priests*—men and women whose whole occupation in life, be it sacred or secular, is a priestly ministry to God. *They shall reign on the earth*—when people have been taught by Christ to live in this fashion it will be safe for God to put the dominion of earth into their hands.

Chapter 6 shows the judgments falling. When we look at them in detail we find that they are a succession of war and famine and plague, but at first it looks as though they aren't normal events. The results of human selfishness have been restrained by God, but this vision tells us that one day Christ will take away the restraints, and selfishness will bound towards its final limit and reap its inevitable harvest. Men and women have become selfish because they have strayed from doing God's will. Their own desires and pleasures have become their whole rationale—grabbing territory in war and hogging all the world's resources. Economic upsets lead to famine and famine leads to plague. In the end it is self-destructive, and God will take off the restraints and let them see where this selfishness leads.

Chapter 7 reveals the esoteric element, and we are shown two companies. First of all, 144,000 who come from every tribe in Israel. These people are sealed so that they shall be protected from the judgments of God that are about to fall. Then a vast multitude from every nation on the earth standing before the throne of God and singing their hymn of praise: 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb' (v. 10).

So we have two companies—one is *sealed*, the other declares *salvation*. It seems to me that these terms are deliberately used in this context.

Sealed. This is a very common idea in the New Testament. For instance, Paul reminds Christian people that they have been 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit' (Eph 1:13) and they shall be protected from the judgments of God when they eventually fall. Our Lord spoke to his contemporaries about this security from God's judgment that is the privilege of those that have trusted the Saviour.

Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:24)

In a context of these coming judgments the Apostle Paul reminds us that ‘God has not destined us for wrath’ (1 Thess 5:9). We are to guard our thinking by putting on the helmet of salvation (v. 8). Indeed, every true believer in Christ may look forward to those days of terrible judgments with equanimity and calm because he rests upon the promise of God and knows he has been sealed by God’s Holy Spirit and shall not come into judgment.

Salvation. The second company declares to us the grounds of their salvation. As they come, crying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb,’ we are told they are ‘clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands’ (7:9). ‘They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb’ (v. 14). Their salvation is not on the grounds of attaining to some excellent unselfishness. They too ‘have gone astray; [they] have turned—every one—to his own way,’ but they have been brought back to God through the redemption that is in Christ—‘the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all’ (Isa 53:6).

Then we are told the results of their salvation. They have made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb and it leads to them serving God. ‘Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple’ (v. 15).

And finally, when men and women have experienced Christ’s redemption through his blood and this has led to service of God, God makes the entire universe to be at peace.

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)

2. *The blowing of the trumpets* (chs. 8–14)

This is the most extended passage of the book. The last three trumpets to be blown are also called *woes* (9:12) and are described at increased length. And then there are what appear to be very large digressions, but when we come to examine them they are not digressions. In fact, they lead us to the very kernel of the message of this part, describing the rise of the terrible trinity of evil in the last days. They are ‘the great dragon . . . that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan’ (12:9), who inspires the first beast (*the man of sin*) (13:1–2). That man of sin is supported by the second beast, (*the false prophet*) (13:11). Between them they will achieve a domination that is virtually worldwide, and they will persecute God’s saints to the death.

Now we see the significance of being introduced to the background behind the scenes. In chapter 8 we are introduced to the altar of incense and the prayers of the saints. In chapter 11 heaven is opened, and we are given to see the ark of his covenant. In Old Testament practice the altar of incense and the ark of the covenant were very closely associated. When the priest came to the temple to minister to God at the time of prayer and burned incense at the altar of incense he stood immediately in front of the veil, which itself stood immediately in front of the ark of the covenant. The priest prayed before the ark on the basis of that covenant.

That ark is so called because it contained God's old covenant—the Ten Commandments. The idea of *covenant* gathers to itself all the other covenants of Old Testament time. For instance, in Genesis 15 we read of a covenant that God made with Abraham and with his offspring ('seed', KJV) to give them certain territories in the Middle East. In the New Testament we read again of this covenant and are told that the offspring to whom God made these promises was Christ (Gal 3:16). Abraham's offspring is Christ and not only Christ personally but Christ and all those who have learned to trust him. 'For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ' (v. 27). 'And if you are Christ's, then are you Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise' (v. 29). In Paul's letter to the Romans we have another mention of this covenant and promise, only the territory involved is expanded to cover the whole world—'heir of the world', is how the phrase goes (4:13).

If we join these ideas together we begin to see some light. All down the ages God has promised to Christ and to his people a dominion that is to be universal. At present Christ and his people do not inherit the earth. Far too often his people have been *pushed to the wall*, and Christ himself was crucified and men put him out. But in chapter 8 of the Apocalypse we see the saints praying and much incense is added to their prayers, making them effective. God remembers their prayers, and judgments come which shall remove earth from the grip of those who have it and give the dominion into the hands of Christ and his people. This agrees with the vision that Daniel saw in his prophecy:

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. (Dan 7:13–14)

Again, to show that we are on the right track of the basic message of this part of the book, let us notice the details of chapter 12. There we see a vision of a woman about to give birth to a male child who is to 'rule all nations with a rod of iron' (v. 5). The old dragon, the serpent (which would perhaps be a better translation of the Greek *drakōn*), Satan, stands before the woman, intent on devouring her child as soon as he is born. With these ideas of the woman, her offspring and the serpent, we are taken right back to the beginning of things in the book of Genesis, where the woman was tempted by the serpent and fell. God preached to her his protoevangelium:

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)

This promise about the coming offspring, first given to Eve, was particularised as the centuries went by. The 'woman's offspring' of Genesis 3:15 becomes 'the offspring of Abraham' of Genesis 15:5. The promise is confirmed to Israel—later confirmed specifically to the reigning house of Judah (Heb 7:14) and narrowed down to 'King David and his descendants' (Rom 1:3). Finally, of course, we come to the blessed virgin through whom our Lord was born.

All down the ages Satan has made his attempts to crush that offspring and destroy the royal line through which the Saviour should come. He tried to annihilate the princely house of Judah under the persecutions of Athaliah (2 Kgs 11:1). He failed again when our Lord was born and Herod tried to destroy him. The great climax was reached at Calvary where Satan and his hosts thought at last they had won the battle. But just as in this vision in the Apocalypse (ch. 12) the male child is caught up to the throne of God, so in actual fact our Lord on the third day rose again and his triumphant accession to the throne of God is now the guarantee of Satan's ultimate defeat. However great the empire that he and his minions are allowed to build, it will eventually perish.

Finally, we come to the esoteric element in this second series of judgments and again there are two companies. Not now the 'sealed' and the 'saved' as in chapter 7, but the 'redeemed' and the 'ripened' (ch. 14).

The first company again numbers 144,000, and we are told that they were redeemed—they were bought 'from the earth' (14:3). Then later in the chapter we are given the vision of the great harvest home at the end of the age, reminiscent of our Lord's parable of the Weeds.

The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. (Matt 13:41–43)

It is worth thinking just for a moment more about these figures. The first company that is redeemed out of the earth remind us of God's tactics in this present age when Satan and his minions are allowed to triumph. Very frequently God's people appear to be defeated. Even Christ himself has been rejected, crucified and is no longer present bodily in the world. To some it seems as though Christianity itself has failed and is getting less and less influential as the years go by. To become depressed about that would of course be altogether mistaken. God's declared policy is to allow Satan to reach what appears to be a virtually complete triumph at the end of this age. God is not disturbed. He is going to let man discover by experience what it means to choose Satan rather than God. At the same time God is redeeming a people for himself, and when the day of Christ's coming arrives they shall be given the government along with Christ.

The second company is the great harvest (Rev 14:15). Just as the grain is ripened by storm and wind, so God ripens and matures his people by leaving them in this world during the time of Satan's grim opposition. He uses life's joys and trials and the persecution of the enemies of God themselves to ripen the characters of his people to be eternally fruitful and valuable for God. When the day of persecution and suffering is done they will be qualified to take over the dominion that God will wrest from the hands of Satan and his followers and give into the hands of Christ and his people.

With this we have reached the end of chapter 14 and the end of the second series of judgments.

3. *The bowls are poured out on the earth* (chs. 15–19)

This section has for its new feature the appearance of a woman called *Babylon* riding upon the beast and eventually she is destroyed by the beast (chs. 17–18). She is depicted as a false and faithless woman, standing in vivid contrast to another woman mentioned in the same section, *the bride, the Lamb's wife*. The figures are not difficult to understand. The bride of Christ represents his loyal believing followers—the true lovers of Christ who are prepared to remain faithful to him until he comes, in spite of all the advances made to her by Satan and the world. Babylon represents the false bride—those who pretend allegiance to Christ but have been disloyal and have given their favours to Christ's enemies in an attempt to gain for themselves temporary power.

The background to the judgments that destroy this unfaithful woman and the political power she tries to usurp is the temple of God and the vessels of the divine service that was carried on inside the temple. In this final stage of man's sin we have an insult offered directly to God himself. In the first series of judgments we had seen human selfishness. Here is something worse—false religion encouraging men and women to take their worship from the true God and give it to Satan and his beast. This is such a direct and personal affront to God that, before these judgments begin, the temple of God is filled with the smoke of his indignation (15:8).

Another interesting feature in the background scene is the vision of the great sea—'what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire' (15:2). It is almost certainly true to say that this sea is the technical term used for *the laver* in the Old Testament temple and here again for the laver in that symbolic temple in heaven. The laver stands for the washing of water by the word. We see the relevance of it at once in the context of this unclean and faithless woman, Babylon; and, at the other extreme, the faithful bride of Christ making herself ready for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Our minds at once remember Paul's remarks: 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word' (Eph 5:25–26). Or again, speaking about the secret of Christian renewal:

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. (Titus 3:3–5)

So then, this chapter shows us the provision for the renewal and cleansing of a person and character that alone can fit him or her to become part of Christ's bride.

This *sea*, this great heavenly laver, is further described as being mingled with fire:

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. (Rev 15: 2–3)

These added features have led many exegetes to think that this is also a reference back to Exodus. When Israel was redeemed from servitude in Egypt through the blood of the Passover lamb, the nation was required to commit itself one hundred per cent to the leadership of Moses by being baptised to him in the waters of the Red Sea, and to follow him with unswerving allegiance through all the experiences in the wilderness.

Again this would fit in with the tenor of the New Testament. Paul draws the same analogy. He reminds us how their 'fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor 10:1-2). He warns us that some of them subsequently swerved away from their allegiance to Moses. We have made a profession of Christian faith by being baptised unto Christ as Lord, and Paul tells us that we are expected to show unswerving allegiance to him and not to be sidetracked or drawn away by the allurements of his enemies.

The esoteric part of this third series of judgments is again quite easy to understand. We hear an invitation proclaimed: 'For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready' (Rev 19:7). The marriage supper of the Lamb represents, surely, the consummation of God's redemptive activity. Christ is one day going to 'present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph 5:27). Again Paul continues to remind us that this imagery is founded on the Old Testament story of Adam and Eve. Just as Adam had dominion over the earth, and to assist him in his God-given task he was given Eve, his bride, as a 'helper fit for him' (Gen 2:18); so Christ, when he comes to take over the dominion of earth and rule it for God as it should be ruled, is to have a helper fit for him—his bride, his redeemed people.

The imagery may sound a little grotesque, but in the symbolism in which the Bible is written it becomes exceedingly sacred and precious:

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Eph 5:29-32)

We have now reached the closing chapters of the book. After Christ has reigned for a thousand years, we read that there will be a final rebellion which will be summarily squashed (Rev 20). Then earth and heaven shall depart, as the judgment throne is erected and men and women come to their final and eternal destiny.

Following that there is to be a new heaven and a new earth (21:1). This is very interesting because it shows that God is determined to have forever and eternally a physical expression of the spiritual world. There is to be not merely a new heaven, there is to be a new earth. Linking the two is 'the holy city, new Jerusalem'. It is a figure of the eternal destiny of God's redeemed people. God's salvation is aimed at not merely saving the individual, it is aimed at making him part of a redeemed community.

This figure likewise has its roots in the book of Genesis. When Abraham was converted he was drawn out from the great cities of the early civilisations, Ur, Nineveh, Babylon and so forth. The New Testament informs us that throughout his life of pilgrimage, 'he was

looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God' (Heb 11:10).

In the vision at the end of the Apocalypse of this new and eternal city one of the prominent features emphasised are the foundations (Rev 21:14). The names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are written on them. This tells us that the foundation of community life that shall be God's link between his heaven and his earth is found in the redemptive work of Christ. Notice that it is the names of the *apostles* and not so much the name of *Christ* but of *the Lamb*. In Scripture the Lamb is a term full of sacrificial meaning. It informs us that God is going to build his eternal community on the basis of forgiveness and redemption through the blood of Christ, which has been personally appropriated by those who shall become members of that city. Then the community shall act as God's vehicle of administration of the new earth.

By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. (vv. 24–25)

And on those gates are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel (v. 12), which again takes us back to the Old Testament. The names of Israel's children, so we are told in Genesis 29–30, were deliberately given to enshrine permanently the experiences of Jacob and his wives. In the humdrum of daily life they took their joys and sorrows to God and used life as a vehicle that would lead them near to him. God used those joys and sorrows to produce character, which is summed up in the names of Jacob's sons. These are the very names that are to be placed on the gates of the city. It seems to tell us that life becomes a sacred thing for those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Our occupations (call them sacred or secular), if we take them to God, may become vehicles for our experience of God in our lifetimes. Character is built into us that shall prepare us not only to be in God's heaven but to carry out those wonderful tasks and commissions that God in his wisdom has devised to occupy his redeemed in eternity.

So the Apocalypse ends on a very cheerful note of hope. In many ways it is the coping stone of both the Old and the New Testaments. The Old Testament begins with a beginning—the beginning of creation, then the beginning of man's sin. The Apocalypse shows us the end and the final extent of man's sin. The book of Genesis, immediately after man's sin, shows us the beginning of God's redemptive activities. The Apocalypse shows us the end of God's redemptive activities. But the end of the Apocalypse is a new beginning, for it introduces us to the dawn of eternity—to the dawning of a day that shall know no end, everlasting with the limitless surprises of the infinitude of God's rich imagination and boundless love.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.