

SUMMER 2 - Glimpses of Glory

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 January 1997

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] God, we thank you for your word and pray that you will open it to us tonight. We pray that once again you will open a door of heaven that we may see your glory.

And we pray this that we may be better servants of Jesus Christ, for we ask it in his name. Amen. Please be seated. Well, last week we began this series of studies looking at the book of Revelation chapters 4 and 5.

A picture of heaven, a picture of the glory of God and of the Lamb in heaven, enthroned in splendor. In one sense, there's not a lot of action in chapters 4 and 5 as we saw last week.

Apart from the fact that in the end, the Lamb is found to be the only one who is worthy to open the scroll. But as yet, has not opened it. At the point where chapter 6 begins, the Lamb has come up to the right hand of God, presumably, and taken the scroll from God the Father's hand.

And human destiny which is in the scroll is about to be revealed as the Lamb opens the scroll. The scroll, remember, has seven seals on it. Maybe a bit like those wax seals that come on official letters or occasional wedding invitations or something like that.

[1 : 3 2] And so one by one, each of these seals is going to be taken off. It's some time before we get to the contents of the scroll itself. And each of the seals represents something that happens, as we'll see through chapter 6.

So John is watching this in his privileged place in heaven. He's watching the Lamb come up, take the scroll from God's hand. And in verse 1, he watches the Lamb open the first of the seven seals.

Then I heard one of those four living creatures say in a voice like thunder, Come. And John looked, and there before me was a white horse.

His rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror, bent on conquest. So the first seal is the first of four horsemen, commonly called the four horsemen of the apocalypse, on a white horse.

White is often a color used for conquest. So those who are in heaven have white robes, which signify some sort of victory or conquest. And as we see throughout Revelation, that's a victory that's achieved through the Lamb.

[2 : 4 3] This one on the white horse wears a crown. That doesn't necessarily mean that it's God's crown or God's authority. There's some debate about who this first horseman is, because later on Jesus is crowned on a white horse in chapter 19.

And this white horse, like Jesus, goes out to conquer. But it seems that there the parallels break down and stop. I think it's unwise to think that this person here on a white horse represents Jesus, because like all the others, he was given something.

He, in this case, was given a crown, which suggests God's authority, that the person acts only under the authority of God. And given the way Jesus acts through Revelation, it's unlikely that he is the one who's on this horse.

And certainly the things that he does on this horse, and what they lead into in subsequent verses, suggest that this is rather somebody who's come to wreak havoc, rather than to wreak God's victory and justice.

The second seal, another creature says come, and this time a fiery red horse comes out. Red, a symbol perhaps of battle, and certainly of bloodshed, for understandable reasons.

[4 : 04] Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth, and to make men slay each other. The suggestion behind that is that God has established restraints in this world, and that God is here taking away those restraints, and allowing there to be a world without peace, and where people slay each other.

The suggestion is that God is the one who's restraining evil in the world up until this point. That if God were not exercising some restraint in the world, it would be all out evil and slaughter.

And God here with this second horse is taking away his restraints. And so we find there is evil and slaughter and bloodshed. That certainly fits the pattern of what's found elsewhere in the New Testament about God, and his control over this world.

2 Thessalonians 2, for example. When the lamb opened the third seal, John heard the third living creature say, Come, and he looked again. There before me was a black horse this time.

Black, perhaps signifying scarcity or famine, as indeed the consequences of this horse are. Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand.

[5 : 22] Not so much scales for justice, sort of legal justice, but rather just the normal kitchen scales, it seems. And the implication of that's made clear in the next verse, 6.

Then I heard what sounded like a voice saying, A quart of wheat for a day's wages, and three quarts of barley for a day's wages. And do not damage the oil and the wine.

That's astronomical costs for wheat and barley. Perhaps a thousand percent above the normal costs of wheat and barley at the time. Just a handful of grain is costing a day's wages.

Why is that happening? It's not just rampant inflation through some bad economics, but it's through some warfare and siege. When a nation is besieging another and engaging it in warfare, costs go up as grain becomes hard to get.

There are stories of that in the Old Testament. When Jerusalem was besieged, Ezekiel had the same message, that the costs of grain and so on were astronomical when the Babylonians besieged Jerusalem.

[6 : 32] Same sort of thing in the book of Judges as well. And that's what's going on here. The warfare and the bloodshed that have come through the first two horses bring about siege. That was how usually cities were defeated in the ancient times.

Just camp around them, and in the end they'll run out of water and food and they'll give up. So that's what's going on here. Famine and siege, results of warfare and battle.

Oil and wine, though, are not damaged. And scholars argue about why that is the case. Some think that oil and wine are symbols of luxury. And so it's showing that the outcome or results of war are that the poor suffer.

But the oil and the wine, that still flows freely for all those who are rich, who have it. But some say that oil and wine isn't really quite so much of a luxury. Maybe it's God's limit.

Maybe it's God still exercising restraint, even in the midst of this great turmoil and tyranny that's going on. For what we do find in this picture of havoc is that God remains sovereign.

[7 : 33] And maybe this suggestion of the oil and the wine being okay is not so much that the rich are okay and the poor suffer, but rather that God is keeping his limit. He's keeping his hand on things so it doesn't get out of control.

The fourth seal, verses 7 and 8. And the fourth living creature this time says come. And John looked and there was a pale horse, literally the color of chlorine.

It's a chloros colored horse. Chlorine, green, gray, is the color of a corpse. And that's why it's associated here with death and Hades or hell, the place of the dead.

They were given power over a fourth of the earth, another suggestion of God's restraint, another suggestion of his sovereignty here. It's not all out destruction.

God's hand is still superintending what's going on. But they have power over a fourth, not meaning I think one quarter of the world geographically so much as just throughout the world.

[8 : 33] A quarter is destroyed. Through sword, famine, plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth. The traditional things that wreak havoc in the Old Testament prophecies of curses of God.

What does all this refer to? We shouldn't think of it as a series of chronological horses.

Certainly not think of it as literal horses, of course. It's more a tableau, a picture. Four aspects of the one picture. A picture of military might going on conquest.

A picture of battle and bloodshed. A picture of famine and siege. A picture of swords and pestilence and so on. They sort of overlap and mix together in a way. It's four descriptions of general tyranny in the world.

Possibly it's a description in part of the Roman Empire. Rome was pretty savage. John would have had this vision and written it down and conveyed it to the Christians of Asia Minor after but in living memory of the destruction of Palestine by the Romans in the 66 to 70 war.

[9 : 42] Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. The last of the Jews that held out were at Masada, you may know. And they eventually took their own lives in 73 AD.

But for seven years, the Romans had a fairly bloody and serious battle against the Jews and therefore against many Christians as well. For it wasn't really, it was only just at that point that the Roman Empire was distinguishing between Christians and Jews.

Earlier on, they didn't see a distinction. And we know that in that battle against the Jews, many of the Jewish leaders were taken back to Rome and paraded through the city as the spoils of victory, tortured, fed to the beasts, or even ignited as human tortures to display the might of the Roman Empire.

Many of Jesus' own predictions of the end times in Mark 13 and in parallels in Matthew and Luke, which talk about the savagery that will happen, some of that refers to the end of history, but some of it was referring to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD.

And that's perhaps what we're getting a bit of in Revelation as well. A picture of the Roman Empire at work. People would have understood the savagery that's being spoken about here because Rome was savage and brutal.

[11 : 00] And it's exactly the sort of things that Jesus predicted in some of those passages towards the end of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. War, strife, famine, pestilence, persecution, earthquake, and so on.

But notice here, very subtly perhaps, but very clearly also, who's in charge? It's God. So each of the riders of the horses, or each of the horses, was given a task, or was given power to do something.

And that passive tense, was given, directs our attention to God. It doesn't say God gave it. It's more subtle than that. But was given, and the implication is that it's God.

It's God who allowed all this to happen. It's God who's sovereign. We're not talking about a battle between good and evil where we don't know who's going to win, and it's a real contest and a struggle.

Rather, what's happening here is all under the direct hand of God who's in charge. And remember also that it all happens when the Lamb opens the seals. It's in a sense Jesus the Lamb opening the seals that allows these things to happen.

[12 : 06] Again, a statement of the sovereignty of God. It's God who's in charge. And remember also that it's the four living creatures who worship God, who are faithful servants of God, whatever they stood for, as we saw last week, around the throne of God.

They say, come, and the horse appears. So it's all directed by God, by the Lamb, and by the four living creatures. God is sovereign.

God is in control. And that's a fairly important message for Christians who are suffering the persecution of Rome towards the end of the first century. God's in control.

It looks an awful situation, you Christians in Asia Minor, wherever you are, but God is in control. It may look as though all the forces of evil have been unleashed without limit, but God has restrained it, and God is in control.

And in, almost ironically I suppose, but in the midst of all this tyranny, there is encouragement and comfort for Christians. It may not look it on earth that God is in control.

[13 : 15] Through all the terrible things that are happening in this world, in our world as much as in the time of John, but God is in control, and God is sovereign.

The fifth seal has a different sort of content. The first four were the horsemen coming out and wreaking havoc, but now our attention is switched to heaven, from earth to heaven.

One of the things of revelation is this switch between heaven and earth. We have to be careful to try and see where we are at different points. But John saw under the altar, and it's in heaven it seems, the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

They called out in a loud voice, how long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood. Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

As I said, up until perhaps the 60s AD, the Roman Empire didn't really distinguish between Jews and Christians. That was clear when Paul was in Corinth.

[14 : 32] Jews and Christians, because they thought Christians were Jews, had been expelled from Rome in about 49 AD. The Roman Empire didn't really see the difference.

But come the time of Nero, the first great persecutor of Christians, or first great emperor who was a persecutor of Christians, in 64 AD, remember when he was fiddling and Rome burnt to the ground and he blamed the Christians.

Not the Jews, but the Christians. And that unleashed a great persecution against Christian people all through the Roman Empire, through what's now Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East as well.

And one of the reasons was the Christians' failure to worship the emperor. Jews had somehow got an exemption for most of their, the last few decades against worshipping the emperor as God.

But now it seems the Roman Empire was quite active in trying to persecute Christians and find them out and if they wouldn't worship the emperor then they were put to death, fed to the animals, litters, tortures, and so on.

[15 : 38] And this is a picture of those people who've been put to death. Not just Christians who've died in the course of, you know, just getting old or natural causes. These are Christian martyrs.

People who've been killed because of, as it says in verse 9, the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. Their faithfulness to Jesus Christ was the reason that they were put to death for their faith.

The altar suggests that their death has been acceptable to God. In the Old Testament the altar is the place of sacrifice of course and the blood of a sacrificial animal was spread usually at the base of the altar.

And this is where the souls of these people are. We don't know what of course it looked like but John understood what he was seeing. But being under the altar suggests that it's in God's presence. It also suggests something of God's acceptance of it and even perhaps God's protection of them that they are now with God.

Yes, they've suffered in this world to the point of death but they are with God having died as faithful Christians keeping up the testimony of the gospel of Christ.

[16 : 46] The blood, remember, was the life in the Old Testament. That's why Christians weren't allowed to eat blood or Jews rather weren't allowed to eat blood. And so the word soul is literally life and that's what John sees.

He sees, I suppose, in their shed blood their life that's been accepted by God. They're given a white robe to wear. Garments of heaven are white robes.

Garments of righteousness are white robes. And we find white robes throughout Revelation. And we find later in chapter 7 that these white robes are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

That's what makes them white and why they're in heaven. And we'll talk more about that shortly. But notice that although they are slain, they're dead, they're the martyrs, nonetheless they're still alive.

They cry out, how long? Suggests something of their life after death. That God has accepted them and though perhaps in one sense they're souls under an altar that maybe have not yet fully risen to some resurrection life, it's all a bit too complicated to pin down and we must be careful of trying to force it too much.

[17 : 52] Nonetheless, there is life there for those who are martyrs for the sake of Jesus. And they cry out, how long? How long, sovereign Lord, until you judge? But this is not a call for vengeance and retribution so much.

The cry, how long, is commonly a cry of God's people in the Psalms 94, for example, in the prophets in Zechariah and Habakkuk, crying out, how long, O God.

And it's a call for justice and a call for God's righteousness. Sometimes I think we cringe at some of the statements in the Psalms and the Old Testament that are calling for God to punish his enemies.

Happy is the person who dashes the baby's heads against the rocks at the end of Psalm 134. Most of us would find great discomfort in saying that. But it's not so much a bloodthirsty call for vengeance as it is a call for God's justice.

Because if God does not exercise his justice and therefore punish evil doing, then God is in effect immoral, not holy. He doesn't maintain his own perfect standards.

[18 : 59] So in some sense the call, how long, O God, till you bring justice or till you punish evil, is a call for God's reputation to be maintained. Wanting God's reputation for holiness and perfection to be upheld.

We shouldn't think of it as a vindictive, vengeful call, but rather something for God's justice and God's own reputation to be upheld. Maybe we think of Jesus on the cross saying, forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they're doing.

And Stephen, when he was martyred in Acts 7 as well. But nonetheless, there seems to be a place throughout the Bible for this calling for God's justice to be at work.

I suggest that we're probably not strong in calling for God's justice in our own prayers when we see the evil of this world. Yes, maybe for people who are the exceptions, the Hitlers and the Martin Bryants, but maybe there are times when we ought to be calling for God's justice more often, not for the sake of bloodthirsty punishment or vengeance, but rather that God's justice will be seen and honoured by all.

And that, I think, is the call of the martyrs here, that everyone will see God's standards, God's judgment and justice at work. For we know that God withholds his judgment in order to give people time to repent.

[20 : 22] But there will come a time when that will run out. And in a sense, these martyrs are saying, how long, oh God, we want your justice to happen. And they're told to wait. It's not that they're being impatient, but rather they're told to wait because the times and the numbers are in God's hands.

It's one of the things about the book of Revelation that it all belongs to God in the end. He's sovereign. And so often the commentators and the interpreters of Revelation sometimes, to me, try and give the impression that they are the ones who are sovereign, that they understand it all, that they've mapped it all out, they know what's going to happen in the future, that in the year 2000 or 2007 or in September 2034 something's going to happen.

But Revelation makes it clear that we don't know and God does. And we should let him know and let him get about the business of being sovereign. We're not the sovereign ones. God is. And so this being told to wait until God's time is complete is a statement of his own sovereignty.

Things are in my hands, in effect he's saying. There are more to be martyred yet. Maybe John was, or maybe John's readers would have thought about the current persecution of Domitian in the 90s AD, which probably John's vision was given in that sort of context.

Maybe it's thinking that these are the martyrs of Nero and 30 years later the martyrs of Domitian are yet to be martyred. But then of course in a wider perspective, from our perspective we can see that there are Christian martyrs in every age.

[21 : 45] And we may think the Roman Empire was bloody, but there have been more Christian martyrs this century than all the ones put before. We sometimes think we live in a tolerant age, but more Christians are being put to death for their faith this year, even though it's only a few days old I suppose, than last year probably, and probably more last year than the year before.

It's probably getting worse, not better. The sixth seal and a great earthquake, cosmic upheaval, the sun turns black, the moon turns red, the stars fall to earth, trees shaken by wind, the sky recedes like a scroll, rolling up and the mountains and islands are removed.

It must be an extraordinary vision. Almost beyond description. It's not uncommon in the Bible. Often statements of cosmic upheaval occur in the Old Testament and also in the Gospels to talk about the end times, the final time when God will come to judge.

And that's what we're getting here, I think. Looking forward even beyond the persecution and the tyranny now, looking forward to the day when God's going to bring it all to an end. And this whole universe will be thrown into upheaval by God.

Maybe the Christians who are suffering now see the world in some upheaval. But again, this is saying that God is stronger and bigger still. All the might of the Roman Empire can't change the sun to dark and the moon to red, but God can.

[23 : 14] That's much more fearful as we'll see in a minute. Maybe behind this description people would have remembered Vesuvius in 79 AD, the volcano in South Italy that destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The description of that by the Roman historians is quite similar to this sort of thing, the sky turning black and so on. But cosmic upheaval is a symbol of God's presence and God's visitation.

When he came to Mount Sinai, thunder, lightning, the earth shook. When Jesus died, the same sort of thing. When God is about, cosmic upheaval is quite common.

I don't think we're meant to take all this quite literally. I don't think we're meant to sort of itemize each thing and try and identify the sun turning dark.

Is that an eclipse or something? I think it's a big picture. It's meant to convey a big effect rather than little details. Earlier in the Old Testament, Joel the prophet prophesied that the spirit of God would be poured out on all people and things like the sun turning black and the moon red would also occur.

[24 : 20] When we get to the New Testament at Acts 2 when the spirit comes down on the disciples and many people are converted, we're told explicitly that this is the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. But we're not told anything about the sun turning dark or the moon turning red.

It seems to me the cosmic upheaval is a symbol of the last days. It's a sort of picture identifier, if you like, of God about his business rather than something literal that's meant to happen.

It certainly didn't put off the early disciples seeing in Acts 2 a fulfillment of Joel chapter 2 as well. Well then what happens with this cosmic upheaval is that all the strong and the wealthy, those who are secure and safe and powerful flee.

It's a picture of the mighty fallen, if you like. So verse 15, the kings, the princes, generals, rich, mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves. This is turning things on its head.

The kings, the princes, the mighty and so on, they're the ones who are wreaking the havoc at the moment. But now when God comes in, all the powerful are absolutely impotent and weak and full of terror when they see the work of God about.

[25 : 28] For what's happening in these verses is God's judgment coming against those who are bringing about the terror on Christians in the first four horses. they hid in the caves and the rocks.

They called to the mountains and the rocks, fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the lamb. Well, what irony there. These are people who are strong and they're saying we don't want to get near an angry lamb.

Well, you sort of a little maybe element of mockery. Lambs don't really get that wrathful that you want to hide in a cave. Of course, it's the lamb of God and it's the son of God. But I think in the way it's written, it's almost meant to convey a little bit of mockery.

They're terrified of a lamb. Of course, it's Jesus and they ought to be terrified. But it seems to be mocking the mighty rulers and the princes who are currently engaged in persecuting Christians.

I guess the guilty always flew from God. It's there in Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, isn't it? When they eat the fruit and they flee from God, they hide from him. Of course, they can't hide.

[26 : 34] God finds them. He knows where they are. He doesn't even need to look. The same throughout the Bible. Those who flee from God, they don't get anywhere far from God.

Jonah tried it. He failed. And many others as well. Psalm 139 makes it clear that wherever we flee, God's there. And these people are stupid for trying to get away from God.

They can't. There's no place to hide. And all of this is exactly as Jesus predicted again in Luke 21, for example, and Mark 13 and so on. Who can stand?

Verse 17. The great day of wrath has come. And who can stand? The implication is that none can stand when the wrath of the Lamb comes.

Not everyone likes the idea of the wrath of the Lamb or the wrath of God. It's all right if it sits in the Old Testament, but when we get to the New, let's pretend it's not there.

[27 : 35] And on more than one occasion when I've preached sermons, I've been chided by people afterwards for saying something to the effect that in the New Testament, Jesus or God exercise wrath.

Oh, but he's all love. He's the perfect essence of love, they say. They misunderstand what wrath is and they misunderstand what love is.

For wrath doesn't mean hate. Wrath is the response of holiness to evil. It's not hate. It's not the opposite of love. Indeed, love and wrath go together. The flip sides are the same coin in a way.

They're indispensable parts of the character of God, both Old and New Testament. From the beginning of creation to the end, God is a God who will exercise love and wrath because he's a holy God who will exercise wrath in the face of evil.

Sometimes our weak views of love give cause to our weak views of God's judgment and justice. When we have a robust view of what love is about and the love of God, then I think we're more likely to entertain right ideas of what wrath and judgment are about as well.

[28 : 49] It's interesting to me that the first thing Satan or the devil or the serpent denied in Genesis chapter 2 and 3 is the judgment of God. When you eat of it, you won't die. And it's the same today, isn't it?

The first thing that people get rid of is the judgment of God. When you eat of it, you won't die. But you see, the trouble is with Christian truth is that it all hangs together. And you knock over one domino, you won't die.

And all the rest in the end falls down if we follow it to its consequence. Take away the justice of God or the judgment of God and we're not left with much. The cross gets emptied of its meaning and power and the whole rest of the Christian gospel falls apart.

We've come through six seals and we still don't know what's on the scroll. John must have been quite tense with anticipation. But he's going to be disappointed because one of the little tricks that Revelation plays is that it goes through a series of six out of seven things and then it's time for a commercial break.

Well, we're all familiar with that because of television, of course, so we probably don't quite lose the sense of the tension. But after this, there's no seventh seal. It doesn't come until chapter 8. You'll have to come next week.

[30 : 05] John then saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree.

God restraining the wind. Maybe it's destructive wind. Wind is often destructive in the Old Testament prophecies. And here it's being held back by angels. And another angel comes up from the east having the seal of the living God.

He called out in a loud voice, Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God. Now how do we read this chapter in the light of what we've just read?

We could try and read it chronologically as though this now comes after all that's gone before, but I rather think that it's the other side of what we've already seen. Often in Revelation you get a series of six things which are full of turmoil and terror and havoc and then the interlude or the ad break is a sort of comforting message that runs in parallel with what we've already read.

And that seems to be how we best read this chapter. It's an interlude, another vision, but it's sort of the flip side, an encouraging side for those who are suffering in the light of what's gone on in the preceding chapter.

[31 : 21] So the servants of God are sealed by God, by the living God. A seal suggests ownership. Or protection, safety, that sort of thing. It's the living God which is a word or adjective that's used for God especially when God is doing something significant in the world.

In the Old Testament it occurs a few times. And it also occurs when it's emphasizing the fact that it is the real God not an idol. Not that that's unclear anyway.

But it's stressing the fact that God is powerful and no other gods are. They're absolutely impotent. They're idols without any life at all. And the seal goes on the forehead.

Not uncommon again in the Bible from Cain in Genesis 4 onwards. People have been marked on the forehead with something. In the Jews today, strict Jews today you'll know will strap onto them the words of Deuteronomy 6 on their forehead.

Taking literally words from Deuteronomy 6 verses 6, 7 and 8. Perhaps not meant to be literal in my opinion. Same in Ezekiel 9 when the siege of Jerusalem is happening.

[32 : 28] Ezekiel sees a man going around and putting seals on the forehead or mark on the forehead of all of God's people but they'll be protected from the siege and it's a sign similar to a cross as it happens but it's the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

The seal of protection. This doesn't mean freedom from persecution. Doesn't mean freedom from pain. But rather it means protection in the midst of persecution and in the midst of pain.

And it's a very important difference there. It's saying that God is with you in your pain in your persecution in the terror in the havoc in your death even in your martyrdom.

Not that you're going to be lifted out of it. Not as though you're going to sit down and suddenly God's going to provide you with everything you need and your next door neighbor sitting here and here they don't have any food but you've got a roast lamb or something in front of you. Not that sort of thing.

God is with you in the midst of it all. Therefore in the end you need not fear. It's not a denial of the pain or a denial of the persecution but rather a recognition that beyond it God is with you and he can be trusted.

[33 : 40] I suppose it's a bit similar to the end of Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. It's not saying that we won't go through pain and distress and terror but none of those things can take us away or separate us cut us off from the love of Christ.

It's a similar sort of idea. When you go through trials I'll be with you. When you go through fire I'll be with you. Words of Isaiah words we sing in various hymns that's the same sort of idea.

Not that you won't go through trials or fire but when you do I will be with you. And of course that's sufficient isn't it? That's all we need. All we need is God to be with us.

Whatever the situation of life no matter how good or bad if God is with us it is all we need. It's an absolutely sufficient promise. It may not quite feel it at the time but it is because nothing at all can cut us off from God.

If God has pledged himself to us nothing can take us away. We don't need to fear. We can go through even death and that of course doesn't take us away from God. I remember hearing the story of somebody a Christian I can't remember now whether he was martyred or not and I've forgotten who it was but they took away things from him to torture him and he kept saying you can take that away I don't need it.

[35 : 00] You can take away everything I've got. You can take away my life but it doesn't cut me off from God because you cannot take him away from me. And the torturers were bamboozled by that because they were powerless in the light of that because nothing they could do could take away what was in the end the most important thing the presence of God with that person.

The seal I guess guarantees for Christians that God will not abandon them and that's an enormous encouragement in the face of persecution and terror.

And then we have this 144,000 12,000 from each of the tribes but it's not really each of the tribes because there's some puzzles in the Bible there are all sorts of lists of tribes. You think oh it's easy to name the 12 tribes of Israel there are 12 sons of Jacob and there you get the 12 tribes but that's not quite what we get here.

There were 12 sons of Jacob and often they are listed as the 12 tribes of Israel but there are some problems because one of those sons was Joseph and Joseph had two sons called Manasseh and Ephraim and sometimes Manasseh and sometimes Ephraim and sometimes the both of them get into the lists of the 12 tribes of Israel but if you add them all together that would be 14.

Well usually when Manasseh and Ephraim are there Joseph isn't still left with 13. It's a bit like trying to stack a cricket team. Well usually the one that drops out is Levi because they're the priestly tribe and they don't own any land.

[36 : 24] So you end up with 10 sons of Jacob the two sons of Joseph and there's your 12 tribes. Joseph himself is sort of incorporated in two tribes and Levi they don't have land.

Now that would be all very well if that were the list here but it's not and nobody knows why because we have from the tribe of Joseph in verse 8 but earlier on we have from the tribe of Manasseh in verse 6 what's happened to Ephraim?

Levi's there but where's Dan gone? What's Dan done wrong? We don't know. Oh well Dan was an idolater in Judges. Yes that's true but there's no explanation given here for that.

So it may be the right answer but then why is Joseph there with Manasseh? It's a puzzle and though that's one possible suggestion and there are many others for example someone thinks that initially it wasn't Manasseh in verse 6 but it was Dan and somebody wrote by mistake man and that became Manasseh.

Well who knows? But of course the question you've all got is who are these people? Well of course we all know they're Jehovah's Witnesses don't we because they always tell us that don't they?

[37 : 43] The trouble is there are more than 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses now in the world. It's interesting how these sects rewrite their own prophecies to try and accommodate things that happen. Are they Jews or Jewish Christians?

Are they special Christians? Are they martyred Christians? Is it a literal number anyway? Many people want to make it literal I think that's folly.

Revelation is a book of symbolism it's the genre of symbolism if you pick up C.S. Lewis' book of Narnia it's full of symbolism we know that the lion Aslan is Christ we don't know it because we're told in so many words Aslan is Christ as though it's a sort of little footnote to give us a key but we know that it's the case because of the style of writing it is and who C.S. Lewis was and what's going on in the book and it's the same with the book of Revelation and other bits of the Old Testament as well the type of writing is called apocalyptic apocalyptic writing has symbolism in it the symbolism as I suggested last week is basically interpreted through the Old Testament because these are Christians who are brought up with the Old Testament it's not interpreted through modern books but it's interpreted through the Old Testament which the people who would have got it would have had and knew better than we so we need to be careful it's a symbolic number 12 tribes and 12 is sometimes meant to be a sort of complete number if there are 12 tribes the number 12 came to stand for Jews throughout the Bible and throughout their history the completion of God's people and numbers multiplied by 10 seem to be suggesting a perfect or complete number as well but are these

Jewish Christians how do they relate to the multitude that nobody can number that comes in the subsequent verses I think those who interpret this as Jewish Christians and the next lot as non-Jewish Christians make a big mistake now this sort of perhaps might open up a can of worms that I haven't got time to explain in detail but nowhere in the New Testament is much made of a distinction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians Gentile Christians are non-Jewish Christians rather much much more is made of the fundamental unity of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians so they are one in Christ in Ephesians 2 and Galatians 3 and so on and so forth sometimes Christians get it wrong by saying oh well the church is the new Israel as though we end up with two Israels the old Israel and the new Israel but the term the new Israel is not a New Testament term rather Galatians 6 says that Christians the church is the Israel of God that is the true Israel the real Israel are the people who believe in Jesus Christ whether Jew or Gentile that's the key so what I think is being described here are not Jewish Christians or Jews but rather Christians the perfect number of Christians they belong with Israel they are Israel we are Israel if we are Christians not Jews not Jewish Christians but Christians but Christians are Israel let me illustrate that point from some other verses in the New Testament

James when he begins his letter to Christians says James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ to the twelve tribes scattered among the nations greetings he's not just writing to Jewish Christians he's writing to Christians and he calls them twelve scattered tribes Romans 2 says a similar sort of thing that a man is not a Jew outwardly but rather inwardly not by circumcision that's physical but by circumcision the heart by the spirit that's what makes a person a true Jew and Paul's argument in Romans 2 going on in subsequent chapters is that Christians are true Jews Galatians 3 29 if you belong to Christ then you're Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise we as Christians belong to Christ not because we're racially descended from Abraham but because we believe we're true descendants of Abraham and therefore true Jews Philippians 3 it's we who are the circumcision we who worship by the spirit of God who glory in Christ Jesus that is not physical circumcision that marked the Jews of the Old Testament but rather believing in Jesus means that we're the true circumcision that is we're the true Israel 1 Peter 2 you're a chosen people a royal priest at a holy nation all ascriptions given to Israel in the Old Testament but now applied to the church of the New Testament

[42 : 14] Jew or Gentile the racial point is no longer an issue it's if you're a Christian whatever your race racial or ethnic background whether you're if you're a Christian you are the true Israel so the 144,000 seems to me to be a statement of the church Christians whether Jew or whether Gentile and it's symbolic of the true or the perfect number of God's people and it's actually making a statement of comfort trouble is of course people who try and decipher this in tricky ways lose the fact of what it's trying to say in the first place it's a statement of comfort it's saying that no one will get left out that is no Christian will get left out if you're a Christian don't think oh am I going to make it God's got his seal on you so you can rest assured that God will be faithful to you God will keep you to the end yes there's a call for you to persevere in your faith and not to be complacent and sit back and let God do it all but it's an assurance that God's in charge and if he's put his hand on you you can trust him he'll keep his hand on you and you'll be there because he's chosen you and you belong to him now one of the other things about how this relates to the next verses which is the multitude that nobody can count is that all that John has had about this 144,000 is that he's heard a voice so verse 4 says

I heard the number of those who are sealed it doesn't say anywhere in verses 4 through to 8 he saw them or he counted them he wasn't the sidesman on duty having to count how many people were in church he just heard the number then I looked verse 9 and there before me was a great multitude he hears 144,000 he turns and looks and sees a multitude that nobody can number it's the same group of people remember last week I heard them say the lion of the tribe of Judah can do it and then I looked and he saw a lamb but it's the same thing he heard a lion he saw a lamb but they're the same he heard 144,000 he saw a multitude that nobody could number it's the same thing from two different angles and it's making two slightly different points one the number suggests the perfect number nobody's got out God's got everything in control he's got the perfect number of his people and now when you see his multitude from all the nations it's saying something slightly different about the sovereignty of God one's on earth and one's in heaven the second one's in heaven the great multitude's in heaven one's come from the Israel

Old Testament background in its symbolism and one's come from a world symbolism the first one's saying something about the perfect number and so on now it's saying that the whole world the multitude that nobody can number is there and it's saying that God is faithful it's saying that God is faithful because way back in Genesis 15 God promised that the descendants of Abraham would be as numerous as the stars of the sky or the sand on the seashore and now it's fulfilled John sees in heaven the fulfillment of the promises to Abraham made 2,100 years before him and 4,000 years before us God salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb some of the emperors wanted people to cry out salvation belongs to Mark Antony and to Nero but no salvation belongs to our God many of these words of praise in Revelation as I suggested last week were words that the emperors wanted used of them and they're used here of God to make a polemical point it is God to be worshipped not the emperor because it's God who's sovereign and not the emperor well the angels and the elders and the living creatures they all get in on the act they fall down on their faces and worship God they say amen yes we agree they're saying praise, glory, wisdom, thanks honour, power, strength seven things ascribed to God but it's not just any old praise and glory like we saw last week it's the praise the glory the wisdom the thanks the honour the power the strength be to God all of it belongs to God is in effect what's being said here the rest of heaven is joining in the praise of God not just people but it's the universe the creation we've always got to bear that in mind that what God is on about in the world is not just my sin or people's sins or saving people but it's saving the universe and the picture of heaven is of the universe worshipping God remember Jesus said if there's joy there is joy in heaven when one sinner repents well imagine it when the whole of heaven is filled with repentant sinners like this is a multitude that no one can number unbridled joy in heaven when we in Anglican churches

I should say for those who aren't Anglicans have our communion thanksgiving prayer we say a number of things that resonate with the book of Revelation deliberately because in the celebration of the Lord's Supper one of the things the reformers in writing the liturgy were on about was that we are actually in a sense having a foretaste of being in heaven and heavenly worship and the heavenly banquet that comes at the end of Revelation so we begin lift up your hearts we are in effect lifting our hearts to heaven we are thinking of ourselves as being in heaven with God in his very presence and therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we praise your name saying holy holy holy holy we're being caught up into the worship of heaven the words that come there we saw last week holy holy holy etc Hosanna in the highest meaning salvation in the highest and then at the end of the thanksgiving prayer blessing and honour and glory and power yours forever and ever picking up the worship of heaven because what we're doing in the Lord's Supper is celebrating Jesus' death but in a sense as a foretaste of that heavenly banquet it's good to think of that when we're celebrating the Lord's Supper that we're actually in a sense taking part in heavenly worship well John gets asked a little question here it's sort of sale of the century time these in white robes who are they and for an extra point where did they come from well it's a rhetorical question because John doesn't know and he asks well you tell me you know so Tony Barber one of the elders says these are they who have come out of the great tribulation they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb well as we mentioned last week about the blood of the Lamb you don't wash many things in blood to get them white but the Lamb's blood you do the tense in Greek is what's called the aorist tense it's a once off action they're not continually washing it's not sort of you know every Friday morning

I do my washing because it's my day off and get up and do a couple of loads of washing bit of a chore really if only I could do it once and it'd be done well this is once you don't need to do it again they've washed once finished kaput done and forever clean Jesus died once and though we continue to confess our sins and repent periodically and regularly through our Christian lives in a sense only once was the washing done how do we wash our robes it's not talking about something that we do as though we've got to be clever or good enough to do it but rather it's the exercise of faith if we wash our robes white in the blood of the Lamb we are repenting and receiving forgiveness through Jesus' death we are trusting in his death that has made us clean because he died for our sins what this is saying is that the only way to get to heaven is through the death of Jesus for your sins there's no other way but through the death of Jesus Christ and it's radical and even for those of us who've been Christians for a long time and many of you have been Christians a lot longer than I have it's radical because we always tend to revert into thinking oh I've got to be good enough for God but none of us ever will be none of us ever will walk into heaven on our own right but only because of Jesus' death for us for it's only his death that makes us clean the last verses of the chapter describe heaven so often we get little descriptions and pictures of heaven in the Bible in the New Testament especially but never are they for our own sort of intellectual knowledge as though one day we're going to be asked a question describe heaven in 400 words or something it's always for motivation for now every time heaven is described the point of it is not so that we'll recognize that when we get there we will the point of it is that we'll live lives now worthy of heaven and that's what this description that follows six things about heaven in the last verses of the chapter the people who are there are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple well you can tell that this is a vision that's not meant to be taken literally because when we get to the end of revelation we're told there's no temple in heaven after all but of course we're not meant to worry about that they're little pictures to convey things they overlap they contradict we've got to take each picture in its own merits but this is worship that goes on forever in heaven we shouldn't be worried about night and day because of course there's no sun in heaven so how can there be night and day it means ceaselessly endless worship of God but don't think it's boring because we'll be made to enjoy it when we get there and enjoy it we will and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them his tabernacle word that's used of the presence of God with his people in the Old Testament this is more intimate than anything like that it's a statement of security safety protection it's an Old Testament picture never again will they hunger or thirst

[52 : 56] God will provide everything that's needed relates I guess to Jesus offer the come to me who's weary or hungry or thirsty and I'll give you food and drink and so on but of course in the end it's not just physical satisfaction but it's talking about fulfilling the deepest longing of the soul the sun will not beat upon them nor any scorching heat suggests great comfort the lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd a mixture of metaphors lamb being a shepherd but of course it's picking up numerous Old Testament references to the lamb to the shepherd and to God's care and he'll lead them to springs of living water the sentence emphasises life the living and God will wipe away tears from their eyes it's a place of joy the background for all of those things comes in the Old Testament when Israel was in Babylon in exile away from their land and away from their God the major prophets of the time were the second half of Isaiah

I guess certainly Ezekiel, Jeremiah and then a bit after the end of the exile Haggai and Zechariah and later Malachi most of them look forward to the restoration of God's people to the land but it never happened even though they went back and even though they rebuilt a temple they were never restored in the sense that all those prophets look forward to and when you get to the New Testament that comes out again when Jesus comes we get words of John the Baptist taken from the passages of the exile suggesting that it's in Jesus that the end of the exile will happen it's in Jesus that the restoration will happen and that's what we get here as well that it's only ultimately in heaven which is achieved and accomplished through Jesus' death on the cross that the real end of the exile of God's people will occur and the real restoration of them to God's presence will occur when the temple was destroyed in 587 in a sense symbolically it remained destroyed even though it was rebuilt and later again destroyed by the Romans Jesus is the one who brings about that fulfillment let me finish by saying the Christian church today is perhaps the largest or second largest religion in the world it's sometimes easy for us to think of God being sovereign and powerful because there are

Christians in every nation and in our nation Christians are the majority or perhaps the sort of biggest minority of the people and so on but try and put yourself back in the shoes of the 90s AD the Christian church was minuscule yes it had spread fast but it was still minuscule it was insignificant in many ways in the life of the empire a little itch a little irritation to the empire but maybe not much more this is an extraordinary vision for an impotent small insignificant church it is saying that Christians will triumph against the might of Rome against the might of all evil because of the lamb who was slain that God is sovereign try and imagine yourself as a tiny minority in a country where there's a handful of Christians who are under threat and persecuted this is saying you may look as though you're on the losing end by a long way but you will be victors because Christ is a victor it's extraordinary long odds in a sense for Christians in John's day but he's saying that through the lamb you will triumph let's pray our God we pray that in our lives you'll give us eyes in heaven that we may see your glory your sovereignty that we may see your purposes for this universe in Jesus Christ we thank you that in your great mercy you have chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world that you have brought us to faith in him adopted us as your children justified us reconciled us to you that your spirit is in us sanctifying us and that one day we can confidently say because of Jesus we will be with you in heaven forever we thank you our God that you are sovereign over all these things that you are in charge and though in this world it seems you're so often absent and that the powers of evil and ignorance seem to prevail we pray we pray our God that with the eyes of heaven we will see and know and trust that you are in charge that your truth and light and love will prevail that your justice will be done and that we will be clothed in white robes washed in the blood of that precious lamb whose death for us brings us life

Amen