

Apocalypse Now

Waking to Reality

Revelation 1-3

-Book 1 of 3-

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Preface

A word from John the Apostle one Easter Sunday morning at Lookout Mountain Community Church . . .

Good morning. My name is John. My friends call me Boanerges, which means “Son of Thunder.” I have been transported through space and time to share with you what Easter means to me.

Some of you have a hard time believing that. You don’t have to believe, but I will tell you this: You people take space and time way too seriously. You, of all people, ought to know better!

You think you're so smart because you "discovered" that space and time are relative to light.

Well, two thousand years ago I wrote, "God is light." And I wrote that God is one other thing . . . more on that later . . . but, you see, everything is relative to Him, the Light.

Time is just God's way of keeping everything from happening all at once. Of course, for Him it does. For Him it's always here and now, but for us God stretches out time so long and space so deep that we can learn of His wonder and glory, and sing His song of grace.

Space and time are like pages in a book. But you argue about the pages and never read the story! The angels in Heaven are commanded to speak little to you about space and time, because it makes you do reverence to nothing and pass by what's truly great.

You take space and time way too seriously and laugh at what's real.

By the way, that's your huge problem with the revelation I received. In scripture, it says more than once, "A day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day."

In the Revelation, an angel flies through saying, "Hey, folks on earth! This is an eternal Gospel! Eternal!"

There is the gospel according to Matthew, the gospel according to Mark, the gospel according to Luke, the gospel according to me—John. But there is also the gospel according to Jesus—the Revelation! It's entitled "The Revelation of Jesus," and in chapter four, He said, "Hey! Come up here!" So I did. And He showed me Himself.

In the other gospels, Jesus was incarnated ("in-fleshed") in our space and time, speaking our language. But in the Revelation, I was out-carnated, out of our space and time, listening to God's language . . . eternity.

In my book, the stars fall from the sky two or three times. Christmas happens in chapter twelve after Jesus sits on the throne. I write: "The new Jerusalem is coming down." "Jesus is coming on the clouds of Heaven." "The time is at hand."

You see, in the Revelation, everything is starting to happen at once! – Eternity. It's not a chronology; it's a *kairology*. "*Chronos*" is calendar time; "*kairos*" is God time . . . impact time . . . eternal time. God's eternity—His kingdom—is invading this dead world now. "The time is at hand." Don't you know what "is" is?!

Just about 1900 years ago, I was cast away by the Romans for preaching the Gospel. No phone, no light, no motorcar, not a single luxury . . . as primitive as can be.

Well, now I'm here to tell you what Easter means to me. "So sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip, that started from this Galilean port aboard this tiny ship . . ."

Actually, the ship was a fishing boat that belonged to my father Zebedee. Me and my brother Jim were in business along with Peter and Pete's brother Andy. To make a long story short, Jesus came along and took us fishing. It was Jesus who gave me and Jim that nickname Boanerges: "Sons of Thunder"—Thunder Boys.

I was a hothead. Had it been your time, I would have chewed tobacco and ridden bulls or that white horse "Thunder" that they ride around in your coliseum. I would have fantasized about things like the WWF and Goldberg. (Goldberg sounds Jewish! I like that.)

In our day, we didn't have Goldberg, so boys like me fantasized about guys like Elijah the Prophet calling fire down on his enemies, preparing the way of the Lord. I would picture myself as John the Enchanter throwing fire on the earth: "You half-breed, no-good, Samaritan scum! Make way for the Lord of the Jews!"

Our heroes were, like, the Son of Man in Daniel, with eyes of blazing fire, legs of bronze, a voice like thunder, riding in on the clouds . . . or the mythical Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Me and James were always looking for a fight. I suppose it was my temperament or the times in which we were living. My dad told stories about the rebellion before I was born, when Rome

crucified two thousand Jews outside Jerusalem and left their bodies to rot in the sun and be eaten by birds. I hated Romans . . . almost as much as I hated Samaritans!

But if I'm honest, I'd say I was a hothead mostly because I was scared. I was scared of being cast away . . . an outcast . . . forgotten. You know, I was the second (after my brother Jim), so I always thought I had to make a name for myself.

I liked the name Thunder Boy. But later it confused me . . . What did Jesus mean?

You may be wondering, "Why would Thunder Boy follow Jesus, the gentle Lamb of God?" This is ironic, but Jesus was like walking thunder. He was a roaring lion. Jesus was scared of nobody! Not Romans . . . Pharisees . . . demons . . . death . . . storms . . . and He could thunder. You should have seen Him cleanse the temple.

One day He took me and Pete and Jim up this mountain. On top of the mountain, He was transfigured. Moses and Elijah appeared, and Peter was so stressed out he started yapping. Suddenly a voice from Heaven thundered down, "Shut up! This is my beloved son! Listen to him!"

Jesus was a Son of Thunder, and we got the message: Wherever Jesus came from, it was 100% thunder! Jesus was walking thunder! You never knew where it would hit.

During my third year of hanging with Jesus, He set His face toward Jerusalem. I thought, "Here we go – thunder showdown!"

As we traveled, one Samaritan town would not receive Him. Jim and me came to Jesus and said, "Lord, can we call down fire from Heaven and fry their no-good, Samaritan tails?" That's when The Thunder turned on me. He looked at me, eyes blazing with fire, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of. The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives but to save them."

Then it got worse. Mom got involved. Me and Jim made the mistake of complaining to Mom, and you know how moms are. Before we knew it, we were standing in front of Jesus, and Mom was demanding: "Jesus, you listen to me. When you come into your kingdom, I want my two boys, Jim and John, sitting on your right and left." That was what we wanted, but moms don't have any finesse.

The rest of the guys heard mom, and they got ticked off at us. I can understand. For the Thunder Boys, everything was a competition, even with my buddy Pete and my brother Jim. I didn't see it then, how dead my heart was, but I see it now. Their successes were my failures. I rejoiced over their failures, because it made me feel like a success. I was basically wishing my brother and best friend to Hell all the time.

You call it "survival of the fittest." I've heard you think that explains life, as if you discovered some new theory. It's not a new theory; it's called hatred. It's real. And it's not responsible for life; it's responsible for death.

Jesus said, "He who hates his brother is a murderer." I was a murderer, murdering my best friends, and I was alone. No one could get to me . . . my heart guarded by thunder.

Like I was saying, the guys were furious with me and Jim that day . . . but they were doing the same thing: strutting, posturing, fighting for a name . . . Peter the Rock against Johnny Thunder Boy. It was like that all the time. And then Jesus thundered, "It will not be this way with you guys. He who wants to be first must be slave of all, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Son of Man a slave? Payment? I was confused, convicted, and more insecure than ever. I felt like finding a Samaritan and beating the tar out of him! When we got to Jerusalem, Jesus rode into town on a donkey. I had always pictured a white warhorse! But no . . . a donkey.

Now, you may be wondering, "Hey, Johnny Thunder Boy — I thought you were the Apostle of Love. Didn't you write this verse: *Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one*

that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love?” (I John 4:7-8). Yes, I wrote that. You see, something happened that week in Jerusalem.

On Thursday, Jesus sent me and Pete (Rocky and Thunder Boy) to make preparations for the Passover, which just happened to be that week. Jerusalem was packed with pilgrims all remembering how God delivered us from bondage and death at the price of a spotless lamb.

Making preparations was much more than calling a caterer. Me and Pete had to take a lamb to the temple, with a few hundred thousand other pilgrims, where twenty-four divisions of priests waited with gold and silver bowls. A trumpet was sounded, and we each had to slay our lambs and drain the blood into the bowls to be tossed at the feet of the brazen altar. Blood, fire, and smoke everywhere! And screeching lambs.

Peter was a wuss, so I slayed the lamb. I still remember that lamb and how it looked at me . . . blood running down its neck while the choir in the temple sang the *Hallel* — Psalm 118. *“The stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner.”*

One hundred and fifty thousand lambs slaughtered. A literal river of blood . . . awesome and horrifying . . . What a religion! One thing was absolutely clear: There must be payment to liberate a soul from bondage and death.

You know the story . . . how Jesus administered the Passover after we had a tiff about who would wash the feet; how I laid my head on His chest; how we literally crossed a river of lamb’s blood flowing down the Kidron Valley into the Valley of Gehenna—our word for “Hell.” (You know, God is more than a theologian; He is the Artist, a terror-ific artist.) We crossed a river of blood to get to the Garden of Gethsemane where I listened to Jesus pray.

You know how Jesus called Judas “friend” even as He was betrayed with a kiss; how I got Peter into the high priest’s courtyard where Peter the Rock denied Jesus in fear, and I, the Thunder Boy, hid in the shadows and then fled into the night.

You know how they beat Him and flogged Him; how the crowd turned on Him, marching Him out to the Hill of the Skull where Roman centurions stripped Him and pounded nails through His flesh, lifting Him up into the air so everyone could mock Him as He died.

I don’t know where the other guys were, but I returned in the morning with some of the women, including Jesus’ mother Mary. We stood and watched Him suffer, and I prayed, “Oh, God, where the Hell is your thunder now?! Where is your judgment now, God?”

Well, this is the strange thing: Hearts were judged that day, like a sword that split the crowd in two, and there was thunder. The other gospels record how He cried, “Father, forgive them”; how He ministered to a thief dying next to Him; how for three hours the sky grew dark; how He cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

He was an outcast. He became sin for us . . . suffered Hell for us . . . paid the ransom for us. It’s all true, yet I recorded none of those words in my gospel. It wasn’t those words that broke my heart and set me free.

At one point, Jesus’ mother Mary and I made it to the front of the crowd at the foot of the cross. I could tell He did battle in regions unknown to me. Demons raged, blood flowed, the crowd mocked and spit upon Him, and the sky began to mourn.

Then He saw me. His eyes locked on me and burned with fire. He saw His mother, and they burned with fire for her too. Then, as if nothing else mattered in all the world, forgetting Himself in His passion for me and Mary, He said, “John, here’s your mother. Mom, here’s your son.”

I know that seems small, but it was how it was said and where it was said and why it was said. You see, He didn’t want either of us to be alone. He loved me furiously, relentlessly, and irrevocably, even then. He didn’t have to love me; His nature was to love me.

It’s what comes out in the cracks of life that’s most important.

Hanging between Heaven and Hell, He loved me, and then I saw myself for the first time,

the spirit I was of: pride, hatred, and death. I was slaying the Lamb once again!

He cried, "I thirst." I wanted to die with Him. It felt like He knew me, He drank me in, and I satiated His thirst. He lifted His head towards Heaven and cried, "It is finished!"

And suddenly, in me it was. I didn't know what it all meant, but I knew then that I loved Him. I knew that I wanted Him at all costs. I loved Him.

I know this may seem strange, but His death was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I now know why: It was the heart of God revealed . . . it was love, deeper than conviction, deeper than passion, deeper than definition.

God is love, and for Him all our words fall short. Love Himself ravaged my soul and split that crowd in two.

Somebody once said of a beautiful piece of artwork, "We don't judge beauty like that; it judges us." My friend, you do not judge the death of Christ; it judges you. If you want to believe, you will find the evidence. If you don't, you won't.

His love split that crowd: A Roman centurion dropped to his knees, and I, Johnny Thunder Boy, dropped next to Him; one thief sang for joy, and one thief cursed in absolute hatred; as the earth began to shake, some people hated Him more than ever, and some people loved Him for the very first time.

Then I remembered what He had said only a few days before. *"It was for this purpose that I came to this time. Father, glorify thy name."* Then a voice boomed from Heaven, *"I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again."* Jesus turned to me and said, *"That voice was for you. Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."* He said this to show by what death he was to die.

*Now judgment,
Now victory,
Now the advance of His kingdom,
Now Easter,
Now Revelation!*

On the third day, some women came from His tomb with shocking news: "The stone is rolled away!" Me and Pete (Thunder Boy and Rocky) raced to the tomb. I beat him . . . but I let him go in first. (You see, I was changing.) We saw that the tomb was empty, and I believed.

Mary thought she was talking to a gardener, but it was Jesus. Two guys near Emmaus entertained a stranger, and it was Jesus. We were fishing down at the Sea of Galilee and saw a guy on the shore, and I said, "It's Jesus!"

He appeared over and over again after that third day. But for me, Easter began on Friday when He cried, "It is finished." To the thief He said, "This day [Friday] you will be with me in Paradise."

We say, "It's Friday, but Sunday's a-comin'!" Maybe Sunday is already here . . . when we believe the love of God. Jesus even said, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life." Born again! First resurrection! Easter even now!

And now I will tell you what Easter means to me.

I was on the island of Patmos because of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a voice like a trumpet. I turned to see the voice, and I saw Him, the Son of Man . . . eyes of fire . . . legs of bronze . . . a voice like the thunder . . . and a sharp sword issuing from His mouth. I fell down as if I was dead.

He touched me saying, "I was dead, but now I'm alive forever." It was Jesus, my friend. He out-carnated me—took me to Heaven and showed me the throne of God. Somebody said, "See the

Lion!” I looked and saw a Lamb. It was a Lamb I knew, a Lamb I had slain, still wet with blood.

The Lion is the Lamb; the Lamb is the Lion.

Then I saw wonders upon wonders, and it all revealed Jesus. I saw Jesus bringing His Word; I saw Jesus singing the new song of the saints; I saw Jesus harvesting the earth.

John 4 says (and I quote me): *“Even now he harvests the crops for eternal life.”* I saw Christmas—the Baby hated by the Dragon—and I saw Easter! Apocalypse now. *“The time is at hand.”* *“Look, he is coming on the clouds of Heaven.”*

Chapter nineteen verse eleven (and I quote me):

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God.

The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”

The rider is Easter now.

People say, “You’re making too little of what God will do in the end.” Wrong! We are all making too little of what God has done and is doing now. The Word of God is riding across this dark planet even now. All eyes will one day see Him.

One day this world of space and time will be destroyed by fire, and God will make a new heaven and a new earth. I know that. I saw it. But right now the Word is falling like thunder. Right now the Word of God rides the white horse across this dark world.

The Word of God is Jesus Christ and Him crucified. The Word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. I am saying that the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord is thunder, and that thunder is more solid than this world.

You take space and time so seriously, and you ignore God, for God is love. You seek signs and wonders, policies and laws, and governments. You write books on Russia and the Antichrist and ignore God right under your own nose.

I worry that if some of you had been there that Friday when God exposed His bleeding heart of love on a wooden cross, you would have said, “There’s no thunder here. There’s no power here. God’s not here. Let’s go plan a revival somewhere and maybe God will show up.”

“*Now* is the judgment on this world,” said Jesus. Just as His cross judged the crowd that Friday, the Word I preach is judging you. What will you do with the love of God?

“*Now* is the Ruler of this world cast out,” said Jesus. When he cried, “It is finished,” He paid for our sins, and He disarmed principalities and powers.

“*Now* I will draw all men to myself,” said Jesus. The Rider’s robe is dipped in His own blood. When nothing else in all creation could reach my dead heart, the blood of Jesus on that cross conquered my heart of shame. That’s power!

For two thousand years, His Church has been growing like He said it would: a mustard seed, a pinch of leaven. There is no greater power in history, but ask yourself: Where was the thunder?

- Was it Christian emperors? Or martyrs hanging on crosses with love?

- Was it the Crusades? Was it the Inquisition? Or was it more like a monk named Francis?
- Was it legislation and governments? Books identifying the Antichrist and when the world will end? Or was it more like an old nun holding dying lepers in her arms on the streets of Calcutta in the name of Jesus?

Where were hearts won to Christ? Where was the Rider on the move? Where is the thunder? – It's in you, my friend, in the cracks of life: when you kiss your children goodnight; when you tell a lonely friend "God loves you"; when you forgive your brother or sister; when you stick with your marriage; when you wash somebody's feet; when you care for your mom; when you love naked, despicable thieves hanging on crosses (including yourself). When you love.

The Rider is riding with great power, the thunder is falling upon this dead earth, and Easter is breaking out all around you.

I did call fire down upon that Samaritan town (Acts 8). The fire was the Spirit of God. It drove out demons and filled those Samaritans with joy: the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I am a Thunder Boy. I just didn't know what thunder was. In my gospel, I don't refer to myself as Boanerges (Son of Thunder). I simply call myself "the disciple whom Jesus loved." It means exactly the same thing.

I hope you are a son or daughter of Thunder. I hope you believe. If so, you are anything but a castaway.

When I feel like I can't do it, when I feel outcast and forgotten, like a no-good, ridiculous Gilligan, I don't need an idol. I go down to the beach, I lie on the sand, I stare up at the stars, and I remember that the Lamb on the throne bleeds for me. Stars fall, the Dragon trembles, the Rider rides, and I am seated in the heavenlies with Christ.

Even if I am an outcast in this world, Jesus is an outcast with me, or me with Him. We're together, and I am seated on His throne in faith. God is light, and all space and time are relative to Him. And the "one other thing" that God is? — God is love. So with Him everything is Easter. Amen.

Apocalypse Now

(Revelation 1:1-6)

Several years ago at our high school youth group in Danville, I introduced a study on the letters to the seven churches in the book of Revelation. I began talking about how confusing these times are in which we live, and wouldn't it be great to have a chronology with all the details of the future?

Then I introduced the Revelation.

I told them I had been doing some amazing research, and I began talking about the issue of the harmonic convergence in the seven bowls of wrath. I showed them two graphs which systematically plotted the convergences in the hermeneutical systems of the apocalyptic vision as it relates to the socio-political, geo-synchronic issues of our day, which all point clearly to the year in which the Antichrist would appear on the world scene: 1991.

I then revealed to them the remarkable numeric acuity so prevalent in the last eleven chapters. On the overhead, we began to fill in the blanks of the name of the Antichrist, all according to numeric acuitive construction.

Before our very eyes, the name took shape: *Saksuork Mij*. (Now, of course I just made all this stuff up, but they were totally buying it! — eyes wide open, staring at the overhead.) I said, "I just don't know what this name Saksuork Mij means." Then I said, "What if we turned the overhead over, reversing polarity?" And we did.

All at once, it became clear. The name was not Saksuork Mij; it was Jim Krouskas! Jim Krouskas, our new high school intern, who was sitting in the back row! The staff all screamed; kids started looking at me like, "Hey . . . you made up that harmonic numeric acuity stuff, didn't you?"

We ran to the back of the room, grabbed Jim, and dragged him up front. We ripped off his shirt, and sure enough! He was wearing some Satanic, heavy metal T-shirt under his other shirt. We ripped several other bad rock and roll T-shirts off Jim until he was standing there bare-chested.

But Jim's chest wasn't really bare . . . it was covered with thick, black, curly, Greek hair. Fortunately, we just happened to have an electric razor handy. I yelled to Matt Skinner, "Let's look for the mark!" (I'd seen the movie *The Omen*.)

We began shaving off chest hair, and sure enough, right there on the right side of his chest was a huge, black number 6. We gasped and shaved more, revealing another number 6, saying, "Oh, Jim, we're really disappointed." Then we shaved the other side of Jim's chest, revealing the number . . . 5.

I looked and said, "Oh man . . . Jim, it's 665. I'm so sorry. I miscalculated. I was off by one."

Now, was I off by one or more than one? Did I miscalculate or misunderstand? Whatever the case, I wasn't the first to get it wrong . . .

Remember all the books a few years ago about Saddam Hussein and the End Times? (You could get them really cheap right after the Persian Gulf War.)

Before that it was Gorbachov.

I also remember that Ronald Wilson Reagan somehow adds up to 666.

Before that folks were convinced it was Hitler.

During the Revolutionary War, many Americans were convinced that the Antichrist was King George the Third.

For most of Protestant history, the Pope was thought to be the Antichrist. (It's a view you don't hear much at Promise Keepers reconciliation rallies, but folks like John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, John Wesley, and Martin Luther thought it was the Pope. So Luther, for instance, expected the world to end within his century.)

The church father Hippolytus taught the world would end in 500 A.D.

People were going nuts around 1000 A.D., even more than in 2000 A.D.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have set dates of End Times events for 1874, 1878, 1881, 1910, 1914, 1918, 1925, 1975, and 1984.

When I was in high school, *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the rage. I have another book on my shelf by the same author. It's entitled *The 1980's: Countdown to Armageddon*. It's full of frightening statistics on the U. S. S. R. and how they fulfill Bible prophecy.

In 1988, Edgar Whisenant sold over 3 million copies of *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Could Be in 1988*. (Nineteen eighty-eight was one forty-year generation after Israel became a nation in 1948.) But in late December 1988, bookstores were offering substantial discounts.

In 1989, Whisenant came out with *89 Reasons Christ Could Return in 1989*. (People didn't buy as many that time around.)

The cumulative batting average of all these chronologists throughout history is .000.

A few years ago a fellow named David Koresh taught a class on Revelation. He obviously did some miscalculating, with tragic results. Did he miscalculate . . . or misunderstand?

An old friend really into End Times prophecy called me a while ago and said something like: "The woman will ride the beast tonight over the skies of Jerusalem!" Well, all things are possible with God . . . except maybe for what He says *isn't* possible.

In Matthew 24, Jesus says, "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." Jesus does say we can know seasons, but then He seems to say *now* is the season, so *always* be ready. "Keep your lamps burning, foolish virgins."

Well, why are we so concerned to get the day and hour?

My old friend sent me one of her prophecy newsletters. It quoted Revelation about famines and earthquakes, and then the rest of the newsletter had to do with canning fruit, food storage, and nutritional concerns during the Tribulation. Is that what Revelation is about, why we'll be "blessed" if we read it? We'll get the chronology so we'll be prepared for the last days with canned goods, secret hideouts, and shotguns?

I'll tell you what: The last place I want to be when Jesus comes back is sitting on a pile of food in a secret hideout holding a shotgun, while people starve to death in the streets. Maybe some people stockpile food to give it away. I don't know. But is that why we should read the Revelation?

I've read all of the *Left Behind* series (which has sold a gazillion copies). In those books, the great Bible scholar T'sion Ben Judah sits in a safe-house unlocking the chronology of Revelation, then printing it on the internet, so that the one billion Tribulation saints can be prepared for the coming woes and be encouraged by the countdown to the glorious appearing, when Jesus will return on a white horse, and all eyes will see Him.

I enjoy reading the books. But it paints a weird picture, considering that in Revelation 16:15, Jesus says very clearly, “Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake”

Vernard Eller asks: “Is it plausible that an author who includes such a statement at two points in his book could be writing the very same book for the purpose of telling us when the day was to come: like, ‘Jesus wants to come like a thief, but here are the data you need to calculate the time of His coming?’”

That’s something to think about. But I’m telling you: I don’t think I ever held the attention of the youth group like I did when I told those teenagers I knew who the Antichrist is and when the world would end!

Teenagers, like most adults, think their world will never end. I remember as a teenager being so fascinated with the subject. I suppose that was for several reasons, but if I’m really honest, there were especially two reasons: Before Jesus came back 1.) I wanted to get a driver’s license, and 2.) I wanted to get married so I could experience marital relations. Now I can say, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus, come!”

Yet I’m still the same . . . I want to plan my future. Why? Well, who else will plan it? And besides, it’s hard to keep oil in your lamp twenty-four hours a day!

Jesus said, “The Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.” That’s rude! If only He would tell us, we could set our lamps down every once in a while! (When you “least expect it, expect it.” Then you shouldn’t expect it, because you’re expecting it, which means you should expect it . . .)

I like to maintain control. So I need to know the when, where, and to whom . . . the chronology. Well, there are four traditional views about the chronology of the Revelation:

Preterist. Preterists believe that all of it already did happen, or at least most of it up until chapter twenty-one. Oh no! Are we “left behind”? Not according to the Preterists. They say all the imagery and events described in Revelation were easily understandable and applicable to the people to whom John the Revelator was writing. It was about them. Most of the critical Bible scholars today hold to this view.

Historist. Historists believe that Revelation is an elaborate map of all church history. They’re the ones who usually pegged the Pope as the Antichrist. It was a really popular view during the Reformation. Its adherents were folks like Wycliffe, Knox, Tyndale, Zwingli, Melancthon, Calvin, Luther, Isaac Newton, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, Charles Finney, Charles Spurgeon, Matthew Henry . . . *all* the heavyweights. Hardly anybody ascribes to Historism any more, because they kind of ran out of time. (They had this “day in Revelation equals a year” scheme.) Not only that, but the Pope, for instance, has become a pretty likeable guy.

Futurist. Futurists believe that everything in Revelation after the first three chapters refers to events that have not yet come. This is the most popular view today among evangelicals. It’s the view of the *Left Behind* series; it’s the view you’ll find on the shelf at Wal-Mart, in the *National Enquirer*, and in the *Weekly World News*. I don’t say that to be derogatory, but because it’s culturally the most popular view right now. And movies about bloodthirsty popes with 666 stamped on their heads are just not in vogue. Understandably, the Catholic Church really advocated this Futurist view during the Reformation. Most Protestants shunned it until about 150 years ago. There are different types of Futurists. The most popular today are the Dispensationalists, who argue the Church won’t even be around for most of Revelation, because we’ll be raptured . . . in which case you won’t need canned food and a shotgun! Of course, this view, along with the Historist

view, implies that most of the details of Revelation have just about absolutely nothing to do with the people to whom the book was written.

Idealist or Spiritualist. Idealists or Spiritualists believe that John didn't intend or believe his message to regard any historical events. Instead it was a visionary expression of timeless truths. This view was popular among the early church fathers. Origen, for instance, taught that the beast with seven heads represented evil and the seven deadly sins.

All that is to say that the precise who, when, and where of Revelation is pretty hard to nail down. But then again, maybe not. Let's read . . . "The Revelation [the word in Greek is "apocolyptus"] of Jesus Christ . . ."

Notice it doesn't say "the Revelation of the Antichrist" or "the Revelation of End Times Chronology." The Revelation of Jesus Christ can either mean it was *about* Jesus or it came *through* Jesus. It means both: For "this is the plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:10).

REVELATION 1:1-3: *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written therein; for the time is near.*

"Blessed are those who read, hear, and keep" (not just a few Bible scholars). In the early Church, most people were probably illiterate, so they would gather to read and hear the Revelation in one sitting. I hope you do that soon: just sit down and read . . . just read. It was written to be read as a whole in worship.

"Blessed are those who hear and keep" . . . That could be us! *Blessed*. Why? "For the time is near." Literally: "The time is at hand." At hand!

"At hand" is a common, Bible expression. Do you know what "at hand" means in the original Greek? It means "at hand." When something is at your hand, it's right there. You can reach out and touch it, grab it, or lay hold of it. Jesus came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The time is at hand." Whose hand? I guess whoever reads and hears and takes to heart the prophecy. Wow! They read . . . we read . . . it must mean the time has been *at hand* for 2000 years!

For those early Christians in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—the seven churches to whom the letter of Revelation was written in specific—the time *was* at hand. Well, where was the Antichrist? I don't know, but John tells us in II John 7 that the Antichrist was already in the world. Go read it (or don't you take the Bible literally?).

But this also means that for Martin Luther and his Historist friends who read Revelation, the time was at hand. You ask, "Are you saying the Pope was the Antichrist?" No . . . however, according to John, the spirit of the Antichrist is in the world and has been, and "every spirit that does not confess Christ is the Antichrist" (I John 4:2-3). That's wild!

But this then also means that for every believer in the future who reads and hears, the time is at hand.

And it means for us that if we read and hear, the time is at hand. I'm not simply being a Spiritualist. I really mean it in space and time.

You ask, “Well, when is Jesus coming?” I know He is coming on a white horse at the end of the age, and “all eyes will see Him.” (I wait and wait for that day.) Yet to be entirely literal, taking Scripture at face value, He has come again and again throughout Scripture and in Revelation.

He may come to the church in Ephesus and remove their lampstand (2:5).

He may come to Pergamum to war against the Nicolaitans (2:16).

If Sardis won’t wake up, He may come on them like a thief (3:3).

He said to suffering Philadelphia, “Hold fast . . . I am coming soon” (3:11). Now, did He really mean 1988? Maybe Philadelphia, Pennsylvania? How depressing!

And He said to those in Laodicea, “If any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him . . .” (3:20). He comes for each of us.

And Jesus told His disciples, “I will come again and will take you to myself . . .” I think Jesus comes to get each of His beloved individually at death. Like He said to that thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.”

“The time is at hand.” In Greek, “kairos is at hand.” Guy Chevreau writes:

Time is the key word here because in Biblical Greek there are two words for “time”: the first is *chronos*; English words like *chronometer* and *chronology* are derived from its root. *Chronos* is clock time, calendar time: 1 o’clock, 2 o’clock, 3 o’clock; January, February, March . . . all marching right along. The second Greek word, *kairos* is special time. Those who are mothers know the difference between *chronos* and *kairos*. About nine months or so into a pregnancy—*chronos* time—many soon-to-be mothers shake their husband by the shoulder and say . . . “It’s time!” He opens a bleary eye, looks at the clock, and says, “It’s 3:17 in the morning; go back to sleep!” She’s on *kairos* time, he’s talking *chronos*. So he gets shaken again: “IT’S TIME!!!!” And this time he gets it. “IT’S TIME!!!!”

All reality is now pregnant with “the time,” with “eternity”; all *chronos* is pregnant with *kairos*; all times are pregnant with meaning; all reality is pregnant with the plot, to those who read and hear in faith in Jesus.

Revelation isn’t just about some seven historical churches in the Preterist past . . . or just some ten-nation confederacy in the future . . . or just some series of events in the Middle Ages involving the Pope . . . or just some spiritual ideals. I think it’s about *all* those things, but it’s *especially* about *you*! The *who* is Jesus and you; the *where* is here; the *when* is now.

Their eyes got big in youth group ten years ago, because they thought the Revelation was about *them* and where they were, and that they had met the Antichrist, and Jesus was coming soon.

Well, your eyes should get big too . . . because the Revelation is about you and where you are, and you *have* met the Antichrist, or at least the spirit of the Antichrist . . . and Jesus *is* coming soon. He is here. Eat His body and drink His blood, and the Ancient Dragon rages with fury.

What I’m saying is, “The time is at hand.” And it has been at hand for 2000 years. If you say, “I don’t get it,” that’s fine. Believe it in faith.

Time is weird in the Bible. Not only is “a day as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day”; Bible time doesn’t travel in a straight line sometimes. A lot of Old Testament prophecies, for instance, seem to refer to something in the time of the prophets (like Isaiah). But then we find they also refer to something in the time and life of Jesus . . . multiple fulfillments.

Times show up in different times, kairos in different chronos, qualitative time at different chronological times.

The story of Jesus shows up again and again in Old Testament chronology. In Revelation 13:8, John writes, “The lamb was slain from the foundation of the world.” That’s Jesus . . . but He was slain in, like, 30 A.D. outside Jerusalem! How can that be? But it gets weirder . . .

Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I am.” Not “I *was*,” but “I *am*.” God tells Moses His name is “I am that I am.”

In the next verse, Revelation 1:4, John calls the Lord “The one who is and who was and who is to come.” And I “have been crucified with Christ,” and I am already “seated in the heavenlies” (Ephesians 2:6).

People like us who believe the Word of God know that the distinction between past, present, and future is a stubbornly persistent illusion.

Time is weird in Scripture, and time is weird in physics. At Niels Bohr’s funeral, Albert Einstein said, “People like us who believe in physics know the distinction between past, present, and future is a stubbornly persistent illusion.”

Physics has demonstrated that time is relative to the speed of light, and that at the speed of light everything is perfectly present . . . complete “am-ness.” Was, is, and is to come are all present. At the speed of light, there is no chronology; just eternity.

In the beginning, God said, “Let there be light.” He is beyond time, but His eternal kairos is pressing in on our temporal chronos. His light enlightens all men. He entered our time in Jesus, the Light of the world, that we might have eternal life. Eternal life is knowing Jesus. And we can know Him *now*!

Now is not in our chronology. As soon as we see it, it’s no longer *now*. (As soon as we say “now,” the “n” is past by the time you say “ow.”) *Now*, the present moment, is when we step out of time, reflect on time, and ask, “Does my time have meaning? Does my chronos have kairos?—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness . . . eternal meaning?”

And Jesus, the Light of the world, gives us meaning—“logos.” Eternity presses in on our temporality. Revelation reveals Jesus, the eternal truth that transforms all time. God’s kairos in all our chronos.

So when you’re surfing the Web alone in your room, and you’re tempted like they were in Thyatira, tempted to sexual immorality, you’ll see the truth: It’s not just biology. You’ll see an Ancient Harlot drunk with the blood of the saints, who rides a beast with seven heads. So you call out to the Lamb . . . and you may end up changing Web sites.

When your life is falling apart . . . poverty, suffering, and tears, like the church in Smyrna . . . the Preterist Futurist debate won’t help much. But read about the New Jerusalem and streets of gold and the One on the throne who says, “I make all things new” . . . and that will help.

If they put a knife to your throat saying, “Renounce your faith or die,” like they did in Pergamum, theories of the numeric acuity of the seven bowls won’t help. But have faith in the Rider on the white horse, who is called Faithful and True, and that will make a difference.

Now, I’m not just talking psychology; I’m talking physics; I’m talking about the *real* world—eternal world—invading this one.

This week I received several e-mails from Brett Edwards in our church, who forwarded them from his Australian pastor friend Ian, who has gone to Manado, Indonesia to work with Christian refugees from the island of Maluku. Last year Islamic extremists declared a “jihad” (holy

war) on the Christians on the island of Maluku. Since then over 10,000 men, women, and children have been slaughtered for their faith. Five hundred thousand have fled their homes. Many have been tortured and force-circumcised (men and women).

Ian writes in his e-mail from last week of all the suffering, and then he writes the most amazing thing:

We have heard on several occasions from different sources the story of Jihad warriors attempting to land their boats in order to attack another Christian village. There is a mysterious figure dressed in white with a beard, riding a white horse, who repels the attackers. There is total confusion, and in the confusion a number of Muslims are killed. This is without Christians firing a shot! The Christians did not know this was happening until they started being visited by the military who were looking for an Australian (can you believe that?!) who was fighting for the Christians. They sent out investigative teams to look for this “Australian.” Christians asked them to describe what he looked like and then responded, “That’s not an Australian, that is the Lord Jesus Christ.” Isn’t that cool? And I’ve heard it from enough credible sources to believe it is not an “urban myth.”

The Rider on the white horse went riding last week. And they recognized Him, for they’d read the prophecy and believed “the time is at hand.” “Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war” (Revelation 19:11).

And if you say, “Oh, that can’t happen until after the ten-nation confederacy!” — *stop it*. Stop trying to control the future. Let the future—eternity—control you. “The time is at hand.”

In fact, the end of your time is as close as your next heartbeat. He’s coming back on the clouds of Heaven at the end of the age . . . or maybe you’ll get hit by a truck on your way home. And behold, the kairos is at your chronos. The time is at hand.

“Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near [at hand].”

REVELATION 1:4-6: John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Further Reading

From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

-Matthew 4:17

And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time [kairos] is at hand.

-Revelation 22:10

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left. Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the householder had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have watched and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

-Matthew 24:36-44

But as to the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When people say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape. But you are not in darkness, brethren, for that day to surprise you like a thief.

-I Thessalonians 5:1-4

As we have just pointed out, the prophets had two foci in their prophetic perspective: the events of the present and the immediate future, and the ultimate eschatological event. These two are held in a dynamic tension often without chronological distinction, for the main purpose of prophecy is not to give a program or chart of the future, but to let the light of the eschatological consummation fall on the present (II Pet. 1:19). Thus in Amos' prophecy the impending historical judgment of Israel at the hands of Assyria was called the Day of the Lord (Amos 5:18, 27), and the eschatological salvation of Israel will also occur in that day (9:11). Isaiah pictured the overthrow of Babylon in apocalyptic colors as though it were the end of the world (Isa. 13:1-22). Zephaniah described some (to us) unknown historical visitation as the Day of the Lord which would consume the entire earth and its inhabitants (1:2-18) as though with fire (1:18; 3:8). Joel moved imperceptibly from historical plagues of locust and drought into the eschatological judgments of the Day of the Lord.

-George Ladd, *Revelation*

Time is nature's way to keep everything from happening all at once.

-Edwin Taylor

“There seems no plan because it is all plan: there seems no center because it is all center. Blessed be He! Yet this seeming also is the end and final cause for which He spreads

out Time so long and Heaven so deep”

-C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*

The riddle of the present is the deepest of all the riddles of time. Again, there is no answer except from that which comprises all time and lies beyond it—the eternal. Whenever we say “now” or “today,” we stop the flux of time for us. We accept the present and do not care that it is gone in the moment that we accept it. We live in it and it is renewed for us in every new “present.” This is possible because every moment of time reaches into the eternal. It is the eternal that stops the flux of time for us. It is the eternal “now” which provides for us a temporal “now.” We live so long as “it is still today”—in the words of the letter to the Hebrews. Not everybody, and nobody all the time, is aware of this “eternal now” in the temporal “now.” But sometimes it breaks powerfully into our consciousness and gives us the certainty of the eternal, of a dimension of time which cuts into time and gives us our time.

-Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*

“The humans live in time, but our Enemy [God] destines them to eternity. He therefore, I believe, wants them to attend chiefly to two things, to eternity itself and to that point of time which they call the Present. For the Present is the point at which time touches eternity. Of the present moment, and of it only, humans have an experience analogous to the experience which our Enemy [God] has of reality as a whole; in it alone freedom and actuality are offered them. He would therefore have them continually concerned either with eternity (which means being concerned with Him) or with the Present—either meditating on their eternal union with, or separation from, Himself, or else obeying the present voice of conscience, bearing the present cross, receiving the present grace, giving thanks for the present pleasure.”

-C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

-John 8:58

To Dream and Stop Dreaming

(Revelation 1:9-20)

REVELATION 1:9-20: *I, John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."*

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning 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 girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter. As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. . . ."

Wow! That's pretty incredible. Do you believe it? You believe it as a metaphor, right? Because you don't *actually* believe Jesus had a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of His mouth! How could He talk?

Do you *actually* believe He had seven stars in His hand? Do you *actually* believe Lookout Mountain Community Church is a *lampstand*? Was Jesus *actually* on Patmos? He is at the right hand of the Father on high . . . so was He actually at Patmos or was it more like a *dream*?

Dreams are important. Psychologists say dreams are critical. They are metaphors that help us work through realities. But dreams are not real . . . are they?

In a recent *Rocky Mountain News* article on people's belief in the paranormal, a Professor Baker is quoted as saying:

Modern Americans aren't so different than primitive humans who thought that when lightning struck it was God throwing thunderbolts. So many things about the world and nature are absolutely mysterious to them. The desire to find supernatural explanations for natural events is still with us, and will be until more people get good basic scientific educations.

Professor Baker and Professor Preston talk about how important it is for folks who believe in things like UFO's and crystals, and folks who are fundamentalist Christians, to get good, *basic*, scientific education. What *is* scientific education? The scientific method verifies hypotheses that can

be tested and comprehended in a controlled environment. It studies this world of space and time.

When I was a teenager, Mark Reinke, who is in my small group now, would sometimes come to speak to our youth group pastored by Gary Reddish. I remember he told the youth group at some point that he had actually conclusively disproved the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ using the latest, cutting-edge, scientific methodology.

You see, Mark Reinke had obtained several laboratory mice from Colorado State University . . .

He established a controlled environment, which simulated in great detail the ancient city of Jerusalem circa 33 A.D.

He then took some of the laboratory mice and swore them into the ancient office of the Roman Praetorian Guard. He named one of the mice Herod, another Caiaphus, and another Pilate.

Then he took another group of mice and actually circumcised these mice . . . a very delicate procedure. He circumcised them according to the ancient rituals of the Torah.

He then dressed these mice in first century Palestinian garb.

He took twelve of these mice and fed them a diet of bread and wine.

Also simulating the gospel account in great detail for the advancement of human understanding, he crucified one of these mice. This mouse had been previously designated as the “Jesus Mouse.”

Then he took the Jesus Mouse to a small, papier-mâché tomb and laid the body there.

After three days, Mark returned with great anticipation. And the Jesus Mouse! . . . was still dead.

The Jesus Mouse was dead! I’m sorry to shatter your faith, but there you have it! I’m going to go watch football. See ya!

“Wait a minute. Well . . . that’s *stupid*.”

Yes! It is stupid! But it’s no more stupid than any of the “scientific arguments” that have been advanced in the twentieth century against miracle, revelation, and God. And we have swallowed them hook, line, and sinker.

Even Christians have come to believe that the only things that are really real are things that can be demonstrated with the scientific method; that is, things that can be comprehended and tested in a controlled environment . . . space- and time- tested.

Satan took Jesus to the top of the temple and said, “Let’s run a little test. Let’s test the hypothesis. Throw yourself down, and we will see if Scripture is true, if angels will come and bear

you up.” And Jesus said, “Thou shalt not put the Lord your God to the test!”

This last century argued that the only things you *can* believe are things you put to the test. And Satan smiles, for that means we cannot believe in God. We may know more facts than any people in all the world . . . a million facts . . . and none of them have any meaning.

So our children kill themselves today at an unprecedented rate. Teenagers sing, “Take me higher, take me higher to a place where blind men see and I can see.” The adults say, “Nice thought . . . beautiful metaphor . . . sweet dream.” The Lord God thunders, “*Do not* put me to the test.”

Why? I suppose it’s because it is insanely arrogant to act as if God were a laboratory mouse. Yet even more than that, it’s profoundly stupid. For if God *were* to act like a laboratory mouse and submit to our test, we wouldn’t believe it was *God*. What would we do? Probably crucify Him. And if He rose from the dead, we still wouldn’t believe, because it wasn’t a controlled environment or a repeatable event.

Anything really good can’t be proved by science anyway . . . like goodness itself. What scientific laboratory has ever discovered *goodness*? Or justice? Or truth? Or beauty? Or love? For that matter, the scientific method cannot even be proved by the scientific method! Any real scientist knows that.

That’s why I don’t think the *Rocky Mountain News* quoted real science. One of the men was a professor of psychology; the other was a professor of English, not a physicist or a natural scientist. They don’t understand science, and more than that, they haven’t been paying attention. For in this last century, scientists have said some incredible things . . .

They discovered the universe had a beginning—a Big Bang. It was quite a shock to learn that 15 billion years ago, relative to us, the universe sprang into existence. But now, if you were standing at the *point* of the Big Bang, it would be more like almost seven days. Why seven days? Well, because time is relative to the speed of light and specific gravity. (See Gerald Schroeder, *The Science of God*.)

Even saying “the point of the Big Bang” is a misnomer because, speaking ontologically, *before* the Big Bang there *were* no points because points are places in space, and there was no space, according to science. No space and no time, so then *what*? It must have been a *who* . . .

Science has also demonstrated that at the subatomic level, the quantum state of matter mysteriously depends not on a *what* but a *who*—a person who perceives it.

It must really be hard to be a materialist these days when science has shown that matter itself is like a dream. It was quite some time ago that Albert Einstein said, “Reality is an illusion albeit a very persistent one.” He also said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” Do you see what he is saying? It’s as if dreams are somehow more real than fact! That’s wild.

Have you ever had a dream that you were dreaming? I mean by that, have you ever dreamt that you were dreaming, but the dream in your dream is actually a person in the waking world trying to wake you up? How do you know what in a dream is *dream* and what is *real*?

When we are wakened from a dream, the thing that wakes us is a reality that won’t fit in our dream. My dream can all be explained by *me*. I’m the *sport* of my dreams; I’m the *center* of my dreams; I’m the *source* of my dreams.

So, yes!—some of them are very weird, but they all have their source in me; they all emanate from me. It’s all about *me*. But when someone or something wakes me, my mind can’t make that reality from the outside waking world *fit* into the interior reality of my own dream world.

If you wake someone too quickly from a dream, you can kill him, just with the shock. Did you notice that John fell down as though dead until Jesus touched him and said, “Fear not”? The loving thing to do when waking someone from a dream is to wake him up slowly. You do that for

your kids. You whisper in their ear, “Sweetheart . . . hey, buddy . . . you’re having a bad dream. Wake up. It’s a bad dream.”

To the dreamer, in his dream there is a gradual realization that the whisper in his ear can’t be explained by the dream. For a while, it’s like the whisper is a part of the dream—an incongruent part of the dream.

So this is my question: Are there things in your world that can’t be explained by your world? Paradoxes, mysteries, things you can’t comprehend? Maybe they are *real*, and this entire world is the dream. Maybe it’s somebody whispering in your ear, “Sweetheart, wake up, and I will give you light, and I will give you life.”

About those people who believe God is actually somehow behind thunder, Professor Baker said, “So many things about the world and nature are absolutely mysterious to them.” Maybe that’s because *they* are waking up! . . . and Professor Baker is entirely enchanted by his own dream world. No mystery . . . no meaning . . . no paradox . . . no wonder . . . because he’s entirely asleep.

John records in his gospel (and I think it’s the same John who received the revelation), that during one point in Jesus’ ministry, a voice came out of the sky and said, “I have glorified it [his name] and I will glorify it again.” Some standing there said, “It thundered.” Others said, “That was *more* than thunder!” Who was dreaming and who was awake?

What I am saying is, maybe Jesus really *did* appear to John. Maybe Jesus really *did* have a sharp, two-edged sword coming out of his mouth. Maybe Lookout Mountain Community Church really *is* a lampstand. Maybe it’s not just a metaphor. And the mystery, paradox, and wonder don’t mean it’s *less* real than this world, but that it’s *more* real than this world.

How can we know things *more real* than this world? For that matter, how can we ever know anything in *this* world? Science can’t even explain itself!

In 1884, a man named Edwin Abbot published a book called *Flatland: A Romance in Many Dimensions*. Some of you may have actually seen the movie, because the book was made into a cartoon movie to show junior-highers in order to explain concepts of geometry.

But Edwin Abbot didn’t write the book in order to explain geometry as much as he wrote the book to help people believe in God. I never read the book, but I did see the movie. The movie is about a land called Flatland, an entirely two-dimensional world. The beings of Flatland can only perceive two dimensions.

One of the persons in Flatland has a revelation. For a few moments, he is lifted out of Flatland and can see three dimensions! When he goes back to Flatland and tries to explain what he saw, everybody thinks he is dreaming. Why? Because he says things like, “It’s not a simple square, it’s a *cube*!” and “That’s not just a *circle*, it’s a *sphere*!”

And Jesus said, “You’re not just a church, you’re a lampstand”—a paradox—a mystery. But we Flatlanders say, “Nice metaphor. Nice dream, Jesus.”

If we were Flatlanders, our world would look like this [holding a poster board approximately 2’ x 3’]. We would only be able to perceive two dimensions: squares, circles, triangles, etc. Now let’s suppose that a three-dimensional object entered our world and passed through it, like this sphere [a basketball].

If this sphere passed through our world, what would we Flatlanders see? A circle! What would we call it? A miracle. Why? Because all at once a point appeared in our world, then it grew into a circle, then it shrunk back to a point, and then it was gone.

But now let’s suppose there are three-dimensional objects intersecting and staying in Flatland all the time . . . spheres, cubes, cylinders . . . Do you see what that would mean? It would

mean Flatlanders would be surrounded by *miracle* all the time. But they wouldn't see it that way. They wouldn't know it, except, of course, for the one who had the revelation.

He would say things like this: "That's not just a *square*! That's a *cube*!" They would answer, "That's nuts. You're dreaming." They wouldn't even comprehend it.

- We would say things like this: "Hey, that guy over there is reading the Bible." But the guy with the revelation would say, "No! The Sword of the Living God is piercing his soul."
- We would say, "Look—some of those high schoolers are talking to homeless people." He would say, "They're encountering the living God."
- We would say, "Look—a church." He would say, "It's a lampstand!"
- We would say, "Look—that guy is giving a cup of cold water to a little kid in Jesus' name. What a nice thought." He would say, "Behold, Jesus the Christ is drinking His own love."
- We would say, "Hey look—a baby in a manger." And he would start singing with the angels.

Why? His world would be full of miracle and full of meaning. He couldn't explain it all, but he could believe it. He couldn't explain paradox, but he could believe it.

For example, if a cylinder intersects Flatland, what would Flatlanders see? A circle. Now, what would happen if the cylinder intersected Flatland sideways? What would Flatlanders see? A rectangle. What *is* a cylinder? It's an infinite number of circles and rectangles.

Flatlanders would say, "No way! Inconceivable! Incomprehensible!" And the guy who had the revelation would say, "It's true!" *Paradox*.

You're a church . . . and you're a lampstand.

What if I took three fingers and stuck them through Flatland? . . . I spoke to Flatland and said, "Behold, all three circles are one. They are all me. Three yet one. I am trinity." Flatlanders would say, "*What?*" But it would be true.

Do you know you were chosen before the foundation of the world, yet you came to Jesus (maybe) at a junior high camp? Chosen in Him, yet chosen to choose. That's a paradox for me! I can't comprehend that! But it's *true*.

Now suppose time is one of the dimensions of Flatland. For instance, here [pointing to the bottom of the 2' x 3' board] might be 33 A.D. Up here [pointing to the top of the board] might be 2001 A.D. If I took Flatland and held it just like this, a millimeter away from my being, and I spoke to Flatland saying, "Behold, Flatland! The kingdom of Peter is at hand! The time is near!" would that be true? Yes. And where *I* intersected Flatland, I would be *present* at all those points in space and time.

Now let's say I intersected Flatland at *every* point in space and time. Let's say that Flatland was a two-dimensional plain inside of *me*. Then what could I say to Flatlanders? "Behold, in me you live and move and have your being." And they wouldn't even know it . . . unless they believed.

In fact, you could say I was a *reality* in Flatland, that I was present in Flatland wherever people *believed* . . . wherever they *saw*, not with their eyes, because their eyes can only see two dimensions, but with their *hearts*.

What would really be cool is if I could somehow *enter* Flatland as a two-dimensional being. I don't have that capability. Wouldn't it be cool if somebody did?

Well, what I want you to see now is that mystery, meaning, paradox, *miracle* . . . would all seem like dreams in Flatland. Yet those dreams would be *more real* than anybody in Flatland could even comprehend.

Here's an interesting question: Do you ever experience paradox in *this* world of four dimensions? How about mystery and meaning? Do you ever long for justice? What is justice? They've never found that in a scientific laboratory! Or love, or truth, or beauty!

Those things cannot be isolated and tested in our three- or four-dimensional world! And did you know that now, in order for physicists to make their calculations work for the Big Bang and the first few moments after the Big Bang, they postulate at least—at *least*—nine dimensions of space and time?

We are talking about physicists! And we are Christians! We're the ones who believe God made all those things and is bigger and better, and before and after, and smaller and larger, and outside and inside *all* of them!

Do you understand what I am saying? Stop taking this world so seriously. Stop taking these three or four dimensions so seriously. Ironically, it's many fundamentalist Christians who take space and time—this world—so *seriously*. What do we do? We spend our time arguing about exactly when the Great Tribulation will be, and never stop to ask, "What does it *mean*?"

We worry about the science of how the moon could turn blood red . . . so we can convince our non-Christian friends. Or how the locusts in Revelation 9 could have human faces and little, gold crowns. Do you know that in the *Left Behind* series they actually *do*? I like that book—I'm just saying it has to mean more than that. I believe the locusts have faces in some dimension at *least*, but I think it has to be more than a curiosity piece for first century Christians.

What was John getting at writing to Laodicea? "Hey, guys, guess what! In the year 2000, there are going to be really weird bugs!" I bet it had some *meaning* — like, "Don't trust every human face you see, because even if it wears a crown, it may be a locust from the pit of Hell." I don't know . . . but maybe . . .

Someone asked Madeleine L'Engle, "Do you believe that Genesis is literally true?" She said, "*Literally* true?! I believe it's *more* than literally true!"

If you believe the Revelation is *literally true*, that's great! I think *I* do, if I understand what you mean by that. It's more than a metaphor. But it's also more than literally true. It's about far more than space and time in this world, and your life had better be about far more than space and time in this world.

But now, not every glass of water given to a child is an encounter with the Living God and about more than space and time. It must be given in Jesus' name . . . in faith and in love. For on that day many will say to Him, "Did we not do many, mighty wonders . . . miracles . . . works in your name?" And He will look at them and say, "Depart from me. For behold, I never knew you."

You may do all the two-dimensional works of a Christian and look good to everybody in Flatland. But God knows you never knew Him. Maybe you just went around drawing squares, acting like you were believing in cubes. Not every square in Flatland is really a cube. And there is more to being a Christian than just being square.

You may own every graph mapping the Revelation. You may know every detail. You may comprehend the science of a blood red moon and still not know its meaning. Jesus reveals its meaning. Jesus *is* Meaning . . . Logos . . . Word . . . Truth.

What happens right here in chapter one? Jesus reveals the meaning of the stars. Did you get that? “John, I’ll tell you what the stars are.” And right here in chapter 1, Jesus reveals the meaning of the lampstands. “John, I’ll tell you what the lampstands are.” But you see, we are going to have to trust Jesus to reveal His meaning for the rest of the book as well.

Jesus is the uncreated Creator from beyond and before space and time, who enters our four-dimensional world and reveals meaning. He is the Lamb that opens the scroll; He entered this world, limited Himself in our four dimensions, in order to reveal truth. He purchased us with His blood, from principalities and powers which kept us in darkness and bondage, and He’s waking us up to life in *His* world—the Kingdom of God.

In order to wake up, you must dream His dreams. You must dream His dreams in order to stop dreaming. His dreams are more real than all this world. One day you’ll see they *aren’t* dreams; they’re reality.

How can we know anything truly real? Only through revelation. How can we ever encounter anything truly real? Only through revelation. And that looks like . . . worship.

Flatlanders say, “You are dreaming there on Sunday mornings.”

Did you notice that John was “in the spirit on the Lord’s day”? The Lord’s day probably refers to Sunday. When the church worshipped God, they would all gather together on Sunday. He was in the spirit on the Lord’s day *when* he received the revelation.

Did you notice he was *in* the spirit *when* he received the revelation? *Receiving* the revelation was not *being* in the spirit. So what was being in the spirit? I think it was worship! Prayer, praise, wonder, song, worship . . . in God in Christ.

Worship is the opposite of the scientific method. It’s not conquest; it’s submission.

In an experiment, a scientist tests things to comprehend things. In worship, God tests us and comprehends us. In worship, we surrender to God, and God in His grace reveals His glory. Do you want to know God? Then worship Him, in spirit and in truth. Surrender to the dreams He gives you.

Brennan Manning tells about John Shea, a priest from Chicago. Shea was thirteen years old and an altar boy when he and a friend of his were assigned to sit in the sanctuary for one-half hour and meditate upon the communion wafer (“the host”).

A half hour is a long time for a thirteen-year-old boy. He says that he sat there and looked around the room for a while . . . he kept looking at his watch . . . then he glanced up at the host on the table. Suddenly the host spoke without speaking. It said, “I’m more than a host, you know.”

He looked at his friend, the fat kid with the big, floppy ears. Everybody made fun of him in school. His friend spoke without speaking, “I’m more than a fat kid with floppy ears, you know.”

That night when he left the church, he walked in the dark and saw a widow standing on the street corner with a cane. She glanced over at him and spoke without speaking, “I’m more than a wrinkled old widow, you know.” He glanced up at the sky, and the sky thundered, “I’m more than the sky, you know.”

Maybe God *does* hurl thunderbolts, you know.

People have sat in worship and seen visions and heard words. A thing like that, to be honest with you, has really only happened to me maybe once or twice. But the one time it did happen, I really believe God was revealing this to me:

Peter, everything in your world is more than you know. Those flannel graphs in Sunday School, Peter? Those emotions you felt at youth group as a kid? The kisses you received as a child in my name? Peter—they were *me*. Peter, *you* are more than you know, for I am waking you up from the bad dream of a fallen world.

Have you ever felt love in worship? John wrote, “He who loves is born of God and knows God.” That’s more than you know.

Have you ever felt joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness in worship? In one dimension, they may be chemicals in the blood responding to a good song. But Paul tells us they’re fruit from the Spirit of God.

Have you ever felt grateful in worship? Well, “every good and perfect gift comes from God.”

You don’t have to have experiences like John Shea or even like John the Revelator. Just worship! And pay attention to the dreams that come.

Besides, God has already given you a dream—the book of Revelation. It only seems like a dream because this world is a dream. For it reveals that this world is asleep more than you know. And *God* is more than you know, and *you* are more than you know.

I’m not much for poetry. (I was a geology major.) But I am going to end with my favorite poem:

*They tell me, Lord, that when I seem to be in speech with you,
Since but one voice is heard, it’s all a dream, one talker aping two.*

*Sometimes it is, yet not as they conceive it. Rather, I
Seek in myself the things I hoped to say, but lo!, my wells are dry.*

*Then, seeing me empty, you forsake the listener’s role and through
My dumb lips breathe and into utterance wake the thoughts I never knew.*

*And thus you neither need reply nor can; thus, while we seem
Two talkers, thou art One forever, and I no dreamer, but thy dream.*

- C. S. Lewis

St. Paul wrote, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives within me.” And we say, “Nice metaphor.” Wrong. Absolute truth.

Further Reading

God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

-John 4:24

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

-James 4:8a

However valuable natural theology may be in pointing to the divine and affording insight into his creation, it will only at best be able by itself to bring us to the Cosmic Architect or Great Mathematician. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is to be sought by other means. Worship and prayer is the context in which theology has to be practised: the academic departments of religious studies in our universities are like schools of science unfurnished with laboratories.

-John Polkinghorne, Professor of Mathematical Physics,
Cambridge, *Science and Creation*

In particle physics, for example, all workable theories for the unification of the four fundamental forces of physics require that a minimum of nine dimensions of space and time must have existed in the first 10^{-34} seconds following the creation event. Since God controls all these dimensions, He must be able to fully operate in them all. In fact, who is to say that He does not operate in spiritual dimensions completely distinct from space and time?

-Hugh Ross, *The Creator and the Cosmos*

I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations [apocalypses] of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

-II Corinthians 12:1-4

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.

-Ephesians 6:12

Younger Coloradans and the less educated are the most likely to believe in the occult, extraterrestrials and mystical powers. . . . The fact that there is no scientific proof of those beliefs doesn't seem to matter, said Robert Baker, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Kentucky. Modern Americans aren't so different than primitive humans who thought that when lightning struck it was God throwing thunderbolts, Baker said. "So many things about the world and nature are absolutely mysterious to them," he said. The desire to find supernatural explanations for

natural events is still with us, and will be until more people get good basic scientific educations, Baker said. . . . Michael Preston, an English professor at the University of Colorado, points to a strong desire today to believe in a greater power. It can be seen in presidential candidates invoking God; in pilgrims making their way to the UFO capital of Roswell, N.M., in young people buying crystals and pyramids; or in worshipers filling fundamentalist

Christian churches.

-*Rocky Mountain News*, August 21, 2000

The testimony of the tone deaf would not be allowed to negate the reality of music and so it seems reasonable that those who claim never to have had a sense of the divine should not be given equal weight with those (the majority in the history of mankind) who have. Even in science we are aware that our seeing of the world is always seeing-as, our vision is refracted by those 'spectacles behind the eyes' imposed by our theoretical preconceptions.

-John Polkinghorne, *Science and Creation*

"I made up my mind long ago not to understand. If I try to understand anything I shall be false to facts and I have determined to stick to fact."

-Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyoder Dostoyevsky

Take first the more obvious case of materialism. As an explanation of the world, materialism has a sort of insane simplicity. It has just the quality of the madman's argument; we have at once the sense of it covering everything and the sense of it leaving everything out. Contemplate some able and sincere materialist, as, for instance, Mr. McCabe, and you will have exactly this unique sensation. He understands everything, and everything does not seem worth understanding.

-G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it. It is merely feeble if it does not go as far as to realize that. If natural things are beyond it, what are we to say about supernatural things?

-Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

We are talking about God. What wonder is it that you do not understand? If you do understand, than it is not God.

-St. Augustine

For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. . . ."

-Acts 2:15-17

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil . . . that dread of something after

death, the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns, puzzles the will and makes us rather bear those ills we have than fly to others that we know not of. Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.

-Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I lay and heard them: the wind and the water and the moon sang a peaceful waiting for a redemption drawing nigh. I dreamed cycles, I say, but, for aught I knew or can tell, they were the solemn, aeonian march of a second, pregnant with eternity. . . . In moments of doubt I cry, "Could God Himself create such lovely things as I dreamed?" "Whence then came thy dream?" answers Hope. "Out of my dark self, into the light of my consciousness." "But whence first into thy dark self?" rejoins Hope. "My brain was its mother, and the fever in my blood its father." "Say rather," suggests Hope, "thy brain was the violin whence it issued, and the fever in thy blood the bow that drew it forth – But who made the violin? And who guided the bow across its strings? Say rather, again – who set the song birds each on its bough in the tree of life, and startled each in its order from its perch? Whence came the fantasia? And whence the life that danced thereto? Didst *thou* say, in the dark of thy own unconscious self, 'Let beauty be; let truth seem!' and straightway beauty was, and the truth but seemed?" Man dreams and desires; God broods and wills and quickens. When a man dreams his own dream, he is the sport of his dream; when Another gives it him, that Other is able to fulfil it. . . . Now and then, when I look round on my books, they seem to waver as if a wind rippled their solid mass, and another world were about to break through. Sometimes when I am abroad, a like thing takes place; the heavens and the earth, the trees and the grass appear for a moment to shake as if about to pass away; then, lo, they have settled again into the old familiar face! At times I seem to hear whisperings around me, as if some that loved me were talking of me; but when I would distinguish the words, they cease, and all is very still. I know not whether these things rise in my brain, or enter it from without. I do not seek them; they come, and I let them go. Strange dim memories, which will not abide identification, often, through misty windows of the past, look out upon me in the broad daylight, but I never dream now. It may be, notwithstanding, that, when most awake, I am only dreaming the more! But when I wake at last into that life which, as a mother her child, carries this life in its bosom, I shall know that I wake, and shall doubt no more. I wait; asleep or awake, I wait. Novalis says, "Our life is no dream, but it should and will perhaps become one."

-George MacDonald, *Lilith*

The Witch shook her head. "I see," she said, "that we should do no better with your *lion*, as you call it, than we did with your *sun*. You have seen lamps, and so you imagined a bigger and better lamp and called it the *sun*. You've seen cats, and now you want a bigger and better cat, and it's to so called a *lion*. Well, 'tis a pretty make-believe, though, to say truth, it would suit you all better if you were younger. And look how you can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from the real world, this world of mine, which is the only world. But even you children are too old for such play. As for you, my lord Prince, that art a man full grown, fie upon you! Are you not ashamed of such toys? Come, all of you. Put away these childish tricks. I have work for you all in the real world. There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan. And now, to bed all. And let us begin a wiser life tomorrow. But first, to bed; to sleep; deep sleep, soft pillows, sleep without foolish dreams."

-C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*

As a babe I leapt up on my mother's knee at the mere mention of it [Battle of Armageddon].

No; the vision is always solid and reliable. The vision is always a fact. It is the reality that is often a fraud.

-G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

Imagination is more important than knowledge. . . . Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen. . . . Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one.

-Albert Einstein

Postman says flat out, “We don’t need more data. We have more facts than we can possibly consume. What we are dying of is lack of courage, lack of dreams, a failure of nerve and no computer can give us that.” Computers may be able one day to speak, one day even to think. No computer will ever be able to dream.

-William H. Willimon

Waking to Sovereignty (Revelation 1:1-18)

In preparing for this message, I could not get a conversation out of my mind. It’s one I had a while back with a friend who I think is absolutely brilliant, who God has used in my life in tremendous ways. The conversation happened at dinner, so I don’t know if he really meant what he said, or if he was musing out loud.

At one point in the conversation, he said, “Hey, Peter. What do you think of this recent election fiasco?” or something like that. I said, “Honestly, I think it’s maybe a *God joke* or something.” He shot back, “A *joke*? It’s *evil*.”

He might know, because he hangs out closer to some of those folks. He hangs out with some very powerful people, people who St. John would call “the rulers—the kings—of the earth.” We kept talking about politics, and I said, “Really my problem with the Democrats doesn’t have to do with taxes, the economy, etc. It has to do with abortion. It’s a real problem for me.”

I realize it can be complicated . . . the past and how that affects a pregnancy . . . rape, incest, the future . . . is the child wanted. My friend basically agreed with me on the sanctity of human life, but then he said, “The problem is, no matter what you do, it’s not going to change anything. You see, the Republicans don’t really care about changing anything. I *know*. They’re not going to overturn Roe vs. Wade.”

He informed me of some surprising realities involving government and the kings of the earth. I think he was making an argument that we need to be rather pragmatic about where we can win. I finally said something like this: “I guess the bottom line for me is it’s not really what the government does or doesn’t do but what I do and whether it honors God.”

My friend leaned back and said, “To be honest, I think this may be where we see things differently. I’m not *sure* that God is always in control. This idea of omnipotence is a Greek idea — *all power*. I believe Jesus won at Calvary, I believe He will win in the end, but I don’t think He’s always in control.”

Then he said, “Go to Auschwitz and stand there like I did, and tell me God’s in control. Such suffering . . . under His sovereignty?”

You see what he means. God won the war at the cross . . . is going to win in the end . . . but maybe He's not in control of every little battle in your life. He'd like to help, but He can't. That means then that we have to be pragmatic about winning.

I said to him, "It sounds like you're saying God *needs* you." He said, "Of course! You need the people you love, don't you? You *need* them. God *needs* me."

You know, that is really an exhilarating thought . . . He *needs* me. And it's absolutely horrifying.

I always have trouble sleeping after Session meetings (that's what we call the Board meetings of our church), especially about a year ago when we went through a time when our building program just was not coming together . . . budgets, plans, procedures, people's opinions . . . I didn't know what was right . . . I don't know that any of the elders knew what was right . . . we would have these meetings . . . I would get out at 1:00 in the morning totally stressed and haunted by the idea "God depends on us—needs us." Yikes!

Time and time again I found myself reading the book of Revelation. I didn't know what it all meant. I still don't. One thing, however, was absolutely clear: God is in control . . . every where, every when, and every how.

Then I could go to sleep. Blessed are those who read.

REVELATION 1:1: *The revelation of Jesus [apocalypse of Jesus] . . .*

"Apocalypso" means to "unveil." The Bible ends with a great unveiling—the Revelation. And the Bible begins with a great veiling—"katakalypto." The Great Serpent (the Dragon) is conquered in the Revelation. But the Great Serpent (the Dragon) shows up in the Garden at the beginning of scripture and tempts the man and the woman. He seduces them with the dream of their own absolute sovereignty. The great Snake says to them, "Hey—eat the fruit. Make yourself like God."

So they eat, they know shame, and God casts them out of the Garden. God had told them, "The day you eat the fruit of the tree you die." Adam and Eve become the walking dead, asleep in the illusion of their own sovereignty. They can no longer see God, and all His glory is veiled.

Adam and Eve are blind, dead, and enslaved to the Dragon—the Great Serpent. The dream is a nightmare that turns into Hell . . . alone in the insane, self-centered dream of their own sovereignty—Hell.

REVELATION 1:1-6: *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia . . .*

The seven churches were seven small bands of baby believers in the province of Asia who were beginning to face immense persecution at the hands of the kings of the earth.

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Did you get that? Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests [some versions say “kings and priests”] to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

To Him who freed us! The only people really free in the book of Revelation are those who have been freed by the blood of the Lamb: the Church. They are kings and priests.

Do you see how incredibly weird this picture is? Kings and priests . . . the Church? Those seven little churches? It’s like a God joke on the kings of the earth. The kings of the earth are not where the action is in the Revelation.

The action is with a baby, the Lamb that was slain, who turns out to be born of a woman in Revelation 12, who is clothed in the sun and wears twelve stars on her head.

I believe that woman is us—the people of God. Israel, who contains the promise, gives birth to the child who is caught up to heaven—Jesus. The Dragon hates the child and pursues the woman into the wilderness. God guards her—us, for the Dragon hates the brothers and sisters of the child who was taken to Heaven.

Jesus is born of us. He is fully human as well as fully divine. He is born of us and saves us—His mother, and His brothers, and His sisters—the Church. He even said it: “Who is my mother and who is my brother and who is my sister? All those who do the will of my Father in heaven (Matthew 12:48-49).

Who is that? Us! The Church.

So the action is with the Church. The action is with some baby believers in Asia Minor. They, in fact, are the real kings and priests, while the kings of this world are only pawns in the hands of Jesus the Christ in the service of His Father and His brothers and sisters. For He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

REVELATION 1:7-8: *Look, he is coming with the clouds and every eye shall see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”*

He sounds pretty much in control. In fact, that word “Almighty”—“Pantokrator” in Greek—can be translated “omnipotent”—*all powerful*. It’s not some abstract, philosophical omnipotence; it means actual control over everything. “. . . Lord God who is, was, and is to come, Almighty.” That’s a reference to the Hebrew “Yahweh Sabaot”—absolute and unrivaled power and control over all time, all space, all history.

God is in control every time, every place, and every how. He accomplishes all things according to the council of His will (Ephesians 1:11). He never loses control. He only *surrenders* control. Even then He only surrenders it to Himself, the Son surrendering it to the Father. Then it’s according to plan, and what appears to be His greatest loss—crucified in shame on a Friday—we find out is His greatest victory come Sunday.

On that Sunday, we find out about Easter, the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the book of Revelation, there is never any question of God’s victory . . . every when, every where, and every how.

There is never any question about God’s absolute control.

There is never any question about the Dragon and what the Dragon will do.

There is never any question about what the *Beast* will do.

There is never any question about what the *Harlot* will do.

There is never any question about what the kings of the earth will do, or whether or not there will be famines and plagues and earthquakes and natural disasters. They *will* all happen according to plan.

None of that is in question. The only question in the book of Revelation is . . . *you*. The only “if” in the book of the Revelation regards you—the Church. I know this is a paradox of time and eternity. It’s a paradox of sovereignty and freedom, predestination and free will, but the question is this: Will you conquer?

In *Ephesus*, will they repent of dead works and conquer?

In *Pergamum*, will they renounce idols and conquer?

In *Thyatira*, will they repent of immorality and conquer?

In *Philadelphia*, will they hold fast and conquer?

In *Laodicea*, will they humble themselves and conquer?

Will *they*, will *you*, conquer?

How are we going to find the strength to conquer? I think that’s what the whole vision is about. It’s not as if John wrote seven letters to these churches and then said, “Oh, by the way, I had this vision.” They must read it, hear it, and surrender to it. That is, they must surrender their sovereignty to God’s sovereignty. They must surrender their *dream* of sovereignty to the reality of God’s sovereignty in Jesus the Christ.

When we do, we are hidden in Him, lost in Jesus, found in Jesus. When we do, we are the body of Christ. And *Jesus always conquers*.

I know this may seem strange to some of you – it seems strange to me – but I once encountered a very powerful demon in a friend who had been ritually abused in a Satanic coven for

years. The demon claimed to be Satan. Demons lie by nature, but the power of Christ forces truthful confessions from them as in the Gospel. Just as this demon was about to leave, and as I placed communion wine on my friend's forehead, I said, "Jesus wins." A deep and extremely tortured voice came from my friend's lips. "Jesus always wins," and then it left, by the power of Christ, at my friend's command.

Jesus always wins. Even when He bleeds He wins. Even when He dies He wins.

An Englishman immigrated to the United States of America and decided to become a citizen. He went back home to London to spend some time on vacation with his family, and his family started giving him a hard time. "What did you hope to gain by becoming an American citizen?" He said, "Well, for one thing, I won the Revolutionary War."

You see, that battle's already over! If you surrender sovereignty to Jesus, you always win . . . every where, every when, and every how.

"Thanks be to God," writes Paul, "who in Christ *always* leads us in triumph" (II Corinthians). Then he wrote, "*All* things work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). In Ephesians: "May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened that you may know . . . the immeasurable greatness of His power in us that believe. God has put *all things* under Jesus' feet. He has made Him head over all things." Why? For the Church . . . "which is His body, the fullness of Him that fills all in all" (Ephesians 1).

All creation, the kings of the earth, the plagues, the famines, the dragons, the sufferings . . . become instruments in the hands of Jesus, for loving you—His Church.

Jesus is Lord over time; Jesus is Lord over space. All time and space become instruments in His hands for loving you. He literally transforms past, present, and future for the love of you. When you repent, even your past sins are transformed into a means of unveiling for you the wonders of His mercy.

Think of it . . . natural disasters . . . the kings of the earth . . . famines . . . plagues . . . even dragons and demons . . . space and time: no big challenge for Jesus. But He died for you that you would surrender your dream of sovereignty to Him in love.

Surrender happens *now*—the present moment. Eternity touches time *now*. "*Now* is the day of salvation," writes Paul. I surrender *now*—the point at which eternity touches time—and all time is transformed. How can He *do* that? He's the Lord of time.

My past . . . transformed;

My future . . . sealed and secure.

It really doesn't matter what the kings of the earth do or don't do. They are only pawns in my Savior's hand. It matters what *I* do . . . *now*. That *I* walk in the obedience of faith.

What I'm saying is, I'm not called to win; I'm not called to conquer; I'm called to surrender . . . *now*. When I surrender, He gives me the victory—the win. "Thanks be to God who in Christ Jesus gives us the victory" . . . every when, every where, and every how.

This may be another way of saying it: As soon as I think *I'm* in control, as soon as I think Peter Hiett can preach a really great sermon that could save somebody, as soon as I think I could enact legislation that would affect the kings of the earth and change things, as soon as I think I could bring the kingdom, I'm dreaming . . . the walking dead enslaved to the Dragon and the Beast.

Now, Jesus may do all those things through me . . . save people . . . enact legislation . . . bring

the kingdom . . . but without Him I can do nothing. My calling is to surrender sovereignty to Him. In other words, my calling is *faith* . . . *trust* . . . every moment.

Surrendering to God's sovereignty means dying to the dream of my own sovereignty. And that hurts.

REVELATION 1:9-17: *I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom [or sovereignty] . . .*

Did you get that phrase? – “John, your companion in the suffering and the sovereignty.” My friend is right in this: I don't have much authority to speak to Auschwitz survivors. Neither does he, but John does, and he says “suffering and sovereignty.”

. . . and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

He was the last disciple left; the rest were martyred, and now he is exiled.

On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

In the last sermon, I reminded you that if you wake a person too quickly from a dream, you can kill them just with shock. In our own dreams, our minds are sovereign—they are in control. The thing that wakes us is something outside our sovereignty and control.

The children of Adam are dead in a dream of their own control.

John *saw* the voice. He *saw* the Word of God, “in whom and by whom all things were made, who is before all things, in whom all things hold together.” And John's dream of his own sovereignty was utterly shattered. He fell at the feet of reality as though dead. Every particle in his body was held together by the express will of this voice; every heartbeat was a gift; every breath—entirely dependent on the continuous grace of the One before him. And he could see it.

Your next heartbeat exists solely because of the express will of Jesus Christ our Lord by God His Father . . . because He wills it. Do you believe that? Not really. You consent to it, but if you really believed it, you'd be on the floor. John woke to the sovereignty of God and collapsed in terror.

Many years ago when Susan and I were newly married, we were living in L.A. in a triplex in a dangerous part of town. I came home unexpectedly from a great distance at an hour Susan did not expect . . . it was 3:00 in the morning . . . she was sound asleep dreaming her dreams. I had been driving all night. I had been through a crisis and *missed* her so very much. I *wanted* her. (I *want* the people I love.)

I tried desperately not to startle her, for she thought she was alone. But trying not to startle a person at 3:00 in the morning is all the more entering like a thief in the night. I remember thinking, If only I could enter her dreams and whisper, "Honey, it's me. I'm coming home. And I'm coming like a thief in the night, but it's *me* and I'll be waking you soon." But I couldn't do that.

I wiggled the lock; the keys jiggled in my hand. And I heard a voice of absolute terror from the other room. "Is somebody there? Who is it! Oh my God who is it?" In that instant, I knew what she believed: whoever I was, I was in absolute control, and so she expected me to rape her. Rape is stolen sovereignty.

In that instant, I so wished that I could have entered her dreams and told her, "Sweetheart . . . I will never rape you. However, if you wish, my greatest desire is to make love to you. I am your husband. So, 'Awake, O sleeper. And I will give you life.'"

I don't say that to be cute. I say it because it's the Gospel. The only "if" in all the book of Revelation belongs to the Bride of Christ. Don't you see it? He says, "I will not rape you, but I long to love you. If you will only surrender, I will impregnate you with life."

His love is life.

Well, I didn't have all that figured out at 3:00 in the morning when she freaked out, but I do remember that after I calmed her down and she realized it was me, I received a pretty great lovin' that night!

You see, this is a mystery. Jesus has been veiled, for we have sinned and dreamed our own sovereignty. Jesus has also been veiled according to God's sovereign plan, that God might unveil to us His glory . . .

That we might see the road that leads nowhere,
That we might glimpse over the edge of the abyss,
That we might taste, or at least smell, the scent of
Hell,
That we might dream the insane dream of our own
sovereignty . . .

. . . and then *wake up!* and surrender to His sovereignty in joy . . . to His glory with a knowledge into which the angels long to look, the knowledge of the grace of God in Christ Jesus

our Lord.

“He consigned all men to disobedience,” writes Paul in Romans 11, “that he might have mercy on all.” You see, I believe that in the Revelation we will find out that we the Church sing a song that nobody else knows! The *angels* don’t know it, the *demons* don’t know it, the beasts around the throne don’t know it, but we know it. It’s the song of the Lamb, the new song, and it infuriates the Ancient Dragon, for it is the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. By it the Dragon is defeated. It’s why the Dragon hates all the children of the woman in chapter twelve. It’s why human life is so sacred, for we can know the glory of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and we can become vessels for that very glory, which is Christ in us. In Christ, we conquer. He *gives* the victory to us in grace.

It’s not that He *needs* us, but He wants us, so thoroughly and completely, that he died and rose. We are *wanted* by God.

In this whole abortion debate, I think that’s the number one thing we ignore—What does *God* want? What is *God* doing? Does *God* hurt? Does *God* ache? Does *God* care? Why would we forget Him? It’s the dream of our own sovereignty.

Last week I ended with my favorite poem. This week I want to end with my favorite story. It’s written by Walter Wangerin. As you listen, see if you can figure out who is speaking and to whom he is speaking.

I love a child. But she is afraid of me. I want to help this child, so terribly in need of help. . . . She is retarded, if the truth be told . . . slow in her mind, yet aware of her infirmity and embarrassed by it. . . .

She is lonely all the day long. She sits in a chair with her back to the door, her knees tucked tight against her breasts, her arms around these, her head down. . . . She’s hiding. . . . She sings a sort of song to pass the time, a childish melody, though she is a woman in her body by its shape, a swelling at her belly. She sings, “Puss, puss.” I know the truth, that she is singing of no cat at all, but of her face, sadly, calling it ugly. And I know the truth that she is right. But I am mightily persuasive myself, and I could make it lovely by my love alone. I love the child. But she is afraid of me.

Then how can I come to her, to feed and to heal her by my love? Knock on the door? Enter the common way? No. She holds her breath at a gentle tap, pretending that she is not home And should I break down the door? Or should I show my face at the window? Oh, what terrors I’d cause then. These have happened before. She’s suffered the rapings of kindless men, and therefore she hangs her head

I am none of these, to be sure. But if I came the way that they have come, she would not know me different. She would not receive my love [surrender to my love], but might likely die of a failed heart. I’ve called from the hall. I’ve sung her name through cracks in the plaster. But I have a bright trumpet of a voice, and she covers her ears and weeps. She thinks each word an accusation.

I could, of course, ignore the doors and walls and windows, simply appearing before her as I am. I have that capability. But she hasn’t the strength to see it and would die. She is, you see, her own deepest hiding place, and fear and death are the truest doors against me.

Then what is left? How can I come to my beloved? Where’s the entrance that will not frighten nor kill her? By what door can love arrive after all, truly to nurture

her, to take the loneliness away, to make her beautiful, as lovely as my moon at night, my sun come morning?

I know what I will do. I'll make the woman herself my door—and by her body enter in her life. Ah, I like that. I like that. However could she be afraid of her own flesh, of something lowly underneath her ribs? I'll be the baby waking in her womb. Hush: she'll have the time, this way, to know my coming first before I come. Hush: time to get ready, to touch her tummy, touching the promise alone, as it were. When she hangs her head, she shall be looking at me, thinking of me, loving me while I gather in the deepest place of her being. It is an excellent plan! Hush.

And then, when I come, my voice shall be so dear to her. It shall call the tenderness out of her soul and loveliness into her face. And when I take milk at her breast, she'll sigh and sing another song, a sweet Magnificat, for she shall feel important then . . . !

Then what of her loneliness? Gone. Gone in the bond between us, though I shall not have said a word yet. And for my sake she shall wash her face, for she shall have a reason then. And the sins that she suffered, the hurts at the hands of men, shall be transfigured by my being: I make good come out of evil; I am the good come out of evil. I am her Lord, who loves this woman.

And for a while I'll let her mother me. But then I'll grow. And I will take my trumpet voice again, which once would kill her. And I'll take her, too, into my arms. And out of that little room, that filthy tenement, I'll bear my mother, my child, alive forever. I love a child. But she will not fear me for long, now.

Look! Look, it is almost happening. I am doing a new thing—and don't you perceive it? I am coming among you, a baby.

And my name shall be Emmanuel.

(From *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith*)

For those that have “ears to hear,” I believe we *are* that woman. We, the people of God, *are* the woman in Revelation 12. And Christ is born in *us*, and among us and to us and through us, whispering, “Surrender, my people. Surrender to my love.”

It's not that we are needed but that we are wanted *so much* Christ came to us in a baby, died for us on a cross, and rose from the dead.

And God has put all creation under His control and sent His very Spirit, *born* into the hearts of His people, even the very last and the very least, drawing love out of us, drawing us into His kingdom, that we would surrender and hear His whisper: “Awake, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and I will give you life.”

“John! John! It's me—Jesus. I was born in Bethlehem. And I met you that day you were fishing in Galilee, remember? John, it's me—Jesus. You laid your head on my chest at supper, you listened to my heartbeat, and I whispered in your ear of this day, John.

“John, I asked you to come pray with me, and you were so sleepy. I was praying about this day, John, sleepy-head John. You saw me die. John, *I* am the living one. *I* hold the keys of death and Hell. I am in control, I always win, so don't fear, John. Get up.”

And one day I think you'll feel a hand on your shoulder, and you'll hear the voice that created the worlds and the galaxies say something like this: “Hey, it's *me*. It's *me*. I was singing to you

through your mom, remember? You met me in Denver, remember? I was with you on the couch those nights when you were so scared. I was there. So don't be afraid, because I hold the keys of death and Hell, and now it's time to get up. It's time to live."

REVELATION 1:17-18: *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hell."*

[Prayer]

Lord Jesus, we thank you that it's *you*, and that if we've surrendered our lives to you, it's *been* you, our friend. We know you, just not *all* of you. We thank you, Lord Jesus, that it's you. If it's *anyone* or *anything*, Lord Jesus, we thank you that it's you who holds the keys. We thank you that it's you who are in control, because that means that our sufferings are not in vain, but you use them. And this life is not in vain, but you use it. This world is not in vain, but you have transformed it. On that day when you say, "Get up sleepy-head," we will wake up and say, "Oh! I'm so glad it's *you*! Thank you."

Now, Lord Jesus, it's Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, and I would imagine there are some here who have had an abortion. Some have paid for an abortion. . . .

If that's you, it may be that you have been running from the voice, for you think the voice only speaks words of accusation, but I'm saying stop and surrender; you will see that the words are words of love. If you surrender, He takes that, even that, no—*especially* that, and turns it to His glory.

Further Reading

We are most deeply asleep at the switch when we fancy we control any switches at all.

-Annie Dillard

As I looked, thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days took his seat; his raiment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and came forth from before him; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him; the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened. I looked then because of the sound of the great words which the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time. 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 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.

-Daniel 7:9-14

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go hence.

-John 14:30-31

Pilate therefore said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore he who delivered me to you has the greater sin."

-John 19:10-11

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. . . . For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen.

-Romans 8:28, 11:32-36

You must utterly believe that the circumstances of your life, that is, every minute of your life, as well as the whole course of your life—anything, yes, *everything* that happens—have all come to you by His will and by His permission. You must utterly believe that everything that has happened to you is from God and is exactly what you need. . . . Abandonment is being satisfied with the present moment, no matter what that moment contains. You are satisfied because you know that whatever that moment has, it contains—in that instant—God's eternal plan for you.

-Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus*

To the abandoned soul God is visible even in the proud souls who oppose him. Every creature, whether good or evil, reveals God to him.

-Jean-Pierre De Caussade,
Abandonment to Divine Providence

The real question is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side.

-Abraham Lincoln

There is a sort of devilish perversity in this organizing me not to sin by means of the very thing which ensures that I shall. Faith, on the other hand, consists in the awareness that I am more than I know. Such faith cannot be contrived. If it were contrivable, if it were something I could create in myself by following some recipe or other, then it would not be faith. It would be works—my organizing the self I know. That faith can be only the gift of God emphasizes the scandal of our human condition—the scandal of our absolute dependence on him. I have to depend completely upon what very largely I do not know and cannot control.

-H. A. Williams

In that way you are seeing a picture that was finished when your world was still half-made. But do not think of these things. My people [angels] have a law never to speak much of sizes or numbers to you . . . You do not understand, and it makes you do reverence to nothing and pass by what is really great. Rather tell me what Maleldil [Jesus] has done in Thulcandra [Earth].

-C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*

There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation.

-Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted.

-Titus 1:15

“And the sins that she suffered, the hurts at the hands of men, shall be transfigured by my being: I make good come out of evil; I *am* the good come out of evil. I am her Lord, who loves this woman.”

-Walter Wangerin, *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith*

And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”

-Revelation 21:4a

Waking to Ecstasy

(Revelation 2:1-7)

In 1978, I went on my first date with my Susan Coleman, who is now Susan Hiett. We went to see the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It was sold out, so we went next door and saw another movie that turned out to be terrible. So after that we went back and saw the late showing of *Close Encounters*.

During the first movie, I had managed to get my arm around my date. I was so enamored with her that I would not move it. She said, "Doesn't your arm hurt?" I said, "Oh, no, it's fine." By the second movie, my arm was screaming in pain, but I wouldn't move it. Finally, it was utterly paralyzed . . . from my neck all the way to my fingertips . . . dead meat sitting on her shoulders. At last I had to excuse myself, reach around her head, pick up my arm, set it on my lap, and slap it until it came to.

On our second date, I worked like crazy cleaning the car and making plans. I prepared a picnic . . . I took her up to the horse pasture in the mountains where we kept our horse. But we couldn't catch the horse. So we picnicked on a rock under a pine tree, and we talked about death. My friend Bobby had died that week in a car accident. We talked, and talked, and talked . . . I was stricken with her.

On our *third* date, I arranged a snow-shoeing trip. I prepared a picnic for that trip as well. On the way, we stopped at the top of Loveland Pass, parked the car, and hiked to the top of a 13,000-foot mountain in our tennis shoes in mid-winter. I remember looking at her and thinking, "Wow! What a woman!"

Of course, I was being conned. I found that my wife would rather scrub a million toilets than climb a frozen mountain in mid-winter. But, you see, it was a *beautiful* con. She didn't climb it because she loved frozen mountains; she wanted to be with *me*. She disciplined herself for me.

Well, after that, we snow-shoed to my Uncle Chuck's cabin in the woods, and we had a picnic in the tree house that I played in as a little boy. Having picnics in tree houses doesn't especially float my boat, but I thought that maybe it would float hers. And it *did*. It *worked*. I was in *love*.

We call it "puppy love" . . . "infatuation" . . . and we middle-aged parents warn our children about it. "Be *carefull*! It's infatuation! Don't get carried away. These honeymoons don't last. One day you'll see that, when you're mature. Once you've paid a mortgage payment and lived with life's responsibilities and raised a few children and logged 10,000 hours in the office, then you'll understand that honeymoons don't last!"

On our fourth date, we went to a dance. In a James Bond-like, romance-induced fog, I drove my dad's car over a median on South Broadway in Littleton, Colorado. I bent the frame; it was *bad*. And she still liked me!

I was feeling pretty secure in our relationship, so on the fifth date, we just went to a movie. And on the sixth date we went to a movie . . . on the seventh date we went to a movie . . . eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth . . . went to a movie.

It was long about then that I said, "You know, maybe we ought to date other people too."

An anonymous author wrote this:

Their wedding picture mocked them from the table

Somewhere, between the oldest child's first tooth and the youngest daughter's graduation, they lost each other.

Throughout the years each slowly unraveled
that tangled ball of string called self,
and as they tugged at stubborn knots,
each hid his searching from the other.

Sometimes she cried at night and begged the whispering darkness
to tell her who she was.

He lay beside her, snoring like a hibernating bear, unaware of her winter.

Once, after they had made love,
he wanted to tell her how afraid he was of dying,
but, fearful to show his naked soul,
he spoke instead of the beauty of her breasts.

She took a course on modern art,
trying to find herself in colors splashed upon a canvas,
complaining to the other women about men
who are insensitive.

He climbed into a tomb called "The Office,"
wrapped his mind in a shroud of paper figures, and buried himself in customers.

Slowly, the wall between them rose, cemented by the mortar of indifference.

One day, reaching out to touch each other,
they found a barrier they could not penetrate,
and recoiling from the coldness of the stone,
each retreated from the stranger on the other side.

For when love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle,
not when fiery bodies lose their heat.

It lies panting, exhausted
expiring at the bottom of a wall it could not scale.

No longer lovers. At best, roommates.

REVELATION 2:1-7: “*To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: ‘The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.*

I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false; I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name’s sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.’”

“You’ve abandoned the love you had at first.” That must have been a very *painful* letter for Jesus to write, for He was being spurned by the one He loved.

In the last sermon, I shared with you how I came home and woke my wife at an unexpected hour. I said I wished I could have entered her dreams and whispered to her so she wouldn’t die in shock. “Don’t be afraid, honey. I won’t rape you. But if you desire, if you wish, my greatest longing is to make love to you. I’m your *husband*. Don’t be afraid. Awake, O sleepy one, and I will impregnate you with life.”

When I shared that story at church, I said, “I’m not joking about that! I’m not saying that flippantly! I really mean it, because *that is the Gospel*.” Then I said a few more things and ended with this: “If I remember correctly, that night I got a pretty good lovin’!” And I laughed.

The next week I found out that a lot of folks were deeply offended.

Sometimes I offend people because I’m a callous, insensitive, self-centered bonehead misrepresenting God. Sometimes I don’t explain a concept well. Sometimes, it’s because I preach the Gospel.

A friend told me, “People were offended because you laughed. It made it cheap.” I certainly *do not* want to make it cheap. But I tell you what: I *do* laugh. I *seriously* laugh . . . not in mockery, but in joy – serious, gut-wrenching delight, as serious as a wedding banquet bound in a covenant of blood—the blood of the Lamb. And serious laughter does not come cheap.

When I laughed, I was making an extremely serious point that I want you to get: One day, Bride of Christ, you will awake to ecstasy, and the laughter will be that much deeper and that much stronger because you have been to the edge of Hell, in bondage to the Dragon that rapes your soul.

But now you are being awakened by the Bridegroom, who is the lover of souls. He does not steal your sovereignty and rape your soul; He romances your soul into the ecstasy of surrender. His goal is *ecstasy*. Joy! Deeper than this entire, fallen world! Joy. And it is not cheap.

- “He endured the cross, despising the shame, for the *joy* that was set before Him” (Hebrews 12:2). And what was that joy, Bride of Christ? *You!*
- “The Lord delights in you,” says Isaiah. “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Isaiah 62:5). How does a bridegroom take delight in his bride?
- The Psalmist wrote, “The sun declares the glory of God. It comes forth like a bridegroom

leaving his chamber.” The bridegroom is radiant with delight.

- John said, “The friend of the bridegroom rejoices at the bridegroom’s voice.” In that day the wedding party—the marriage supper—didn’t really get going until the friend of the bridegroom—the best man—heard the voice of the bridegroom crying out from the bridal chamber, “We did it!” And that’s when the rejoicing really began. The feasting began, the laughing began, the party began, the *life* began . . . and they celebrated for a week.

The Great Bridegroom longs to take delight in His Bride. But He *will not* take delight unless she surrenders delight, because *His* delight is *her* delight. And *her* delight is *His* delight. It’s a communion of delight. And that communion of delight gives birth to life, fruit, babies.

But Satan steals, and the Dragon rapes and gives birth to death and fear.

So when I heard people were offended, I felt angry. Not at all angry at those people, but very angry at an Ancient Dragon who lies to the Bride of Christ so she will not surrender to delight, and she *will not* bear life, but fear, shame, and death.

Several years ago I sat in a car with a very good friend who was planning to leave his wife. I was pleading with him to stay. Finally, he said, “Peter, do you know that on our wedding night she wouldn’t let me touch her? She wouldn’t let me make love to her for three days, because she wasn’t interested.”

No doubt my friend’s divorcing his wife was a great sin. But my friend’s wife was also guilty of a great sin. Both believed the Dragon.

We may be married to Christ, and Satan can’t prevent that now; however, with lies he can keep us from bearing fruit. Roommates bear no fruit. Only lovers bear fruit. God doesn’t want roommates; He pursues a lover.

The Dragon tempts us to immorality *and* he tempts us to morality: that is, to shame . . . so we would eventually just become roommates with hearts sealed off to the Great Bridegroom, such that the *seed*—the Word of God!—Jesus Himself!—could not be implanted in the fertile, open soil of our hearts. Like we read last week, “We are our own deepest hiding place, and fear and death are the surest doors against the Lover of our souls.”

The Dragon tempts us with immorality. He tempts us to offer our hearts to idols that end up raping us to our shame. Then we associate passionate, intimate communion, with shame.

We watch television and laugh at sexual innuendos. We talk openly about these things with friends. We tell sexual jokes in the parking lot after church. But if the preacher mentions sex in the sanctuary, we’re offended. How strange. That’s the one place we should not be offended: in the sanctuary experiencing communion (a sacramental union of the physical and spiritual) all bound by an unbreakable covenant.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians about thirty years before John: “For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

Maybe the Ancient Dragon is lying to us about *far more* than just *sex*! He is lying to us about Jesus. He lies through immorality. He also lies to us through morality—sin and law. Immorality is the door to morality—the law.

So Satan whispers something like this: “Since your heart was raped, never surrender it again. Guard your naked heart. Guard it . . . with morality . . . with law . . . keep it prim and proper.

Everything in the proper place! Maintain control over the sovereign, little kingdom of your heart. And this *is* what Jesus is for: to guard the border and keep your little kingdom secure.”

In one of his stories, C. S. Lewis speaks to a frigid bride through one of his characters, and this is what he says:

But your trouble has been what old poets called *Daungler*. We call it Pride. You are offended by the masculine itself . . . the gold lion, the bearded bull—which breaks through hedges and scatters the little kingdom of your primness . . . The male you could have escaped, for it exists only on the biological level. But the masculine none of us can escape. What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it. . . .

We are the Bride of Christ. Why are you betrothed to Christ? So He will guard the border of your prim and proper little kingdom, keeping you safe inside?

Are you betrothed to Him for security?—Eternal fire insurance? “What a great provider!” Did you marry for *security*? Jesus may want to come and scatter the kingdom of your primness and draw you into a wild, passionate romance where you lose everything and gain Him.

He did not hang on a cross and bear the pain of Hell so you would be regular in your devotions, go on one missions project a year, and be a faithful tither. He suffered, died, and bore Hell in order to win your heart . . . that you would surrender your sovereignty to His sovereignty; that you would surrender to ecstasy. But Satan has made you fear the deepest longing of your soul so you would spurn the Lord’s advances and turn Him into a roommate and a border guard.

Jesus writes to the Ephesians, “Ephesus, I see your works. I see your faithful endurance. I see your orthodoxy. And you hate the work of the Nicolaitans. I hate their works too.” (The Nicolaitans may have been a group that taught sexual immorality was just fine.)

I think Jesus is saying, “Thank you, Ephesus. Thank you for hating immorality. Thank you for hating passion out of bounds. But, my dear, you have come to hate passion *in* bounds! You cook, you clean, you take care of the children, and I’m absolutely convinced you’d never give your passion to another. But what’s the *point*? You never give it to *me*.”

“You have forsaken the love you had at first.”

We can philosophize and theologize all we want about what “love” means . . . “agape,” “storge,” “phileo,” “eros” . . . but *you* know what Jesus means.

[Singing] “You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’ . . . oh that lovin’ feelin’ . . . You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’ ‘cause it’s gone . . . gone . . . gone . . . wohhhh . . . (bum bum . . . bum bum . . . bum bum . . . bum)

Baby, baby . . . I get down on my knees for you (bum bum . . . bum bum . . . bum bum . . . bum) if you would only love me . . . like you used to dooooo. Baby, baby, baby, so bring it on back . . .”

“You’ve lost that loving feeling.” And we say, “Lost the loving *feeling*? I can’t control my feelings!” *Wrong*. If you’re a Christian, that is basically psycho-bull-ony. How do I know that? Because the Living Lord says, “Repent. Remember. And do those things you did at first, Ephesus.”

People have said, “Well, Peter, you know, you and Susan seem to have a pretty passionate

relationship,” as if that just kind of *happens*. It is a gift, but let me tell you: we’ve had to *fight* for it beginning twenty-four years ago, after our thirteenth date, when I remember praying, “Oh, God, I think the problem is with me. Every time I win a girl’s heart, I get tired of her—lose passion for her. God, I don’t think I understand love. Help me.”

We’ve had to discipline ourselves for passion: While we were dating, it meant abstaining in hope of greater passion when we were married. Once married, we had to discipline ourselves even *more*. Four little children . . . a wife that gets no sleep . . . a job that can consume every waking moment . . . a culture that constantly invites me to be unfaithful . . . the middle-age spread on my gut and on my wife’s whatever . . . and most of all, the frightened, little, insecure, painful hearts that we each carry into the sanctuary of our bedroom, where God calls us to celebrate the sacrament of our marriage covenant. It’s been a fight for passion. And it has cost me energy and mostly pride. I’ve had to get down on my knees and plead.

Can you imagine how Jesus—the Word that was with God and was God—felt writing to His Bride in Ephesus? I think *I* can . . .

Several years ago, nursing our last child, my wife didn’t have much energy for me. And I was desperate for her affections . . . *any* affection . . . a hug . . . a kiss . . . a smile . . . She would say, “Well, I just grew up in a family that didn’t express itself that much. I cook, I clean, I take care of the children . . . *that’s* how I say I love you.”

But I knew the truth. She was growing tired of the fight—fighting for passion. And it *was* a fight for her, because, unlike Jesus, I can be very critical and self-centered and insensitive . . . not easy to love.

Well, during that time I would stay awake all night sometimes, angry and frustrated, not knowing what to do with my feelings. Sexual immorality—movies, the Entertainment Channel Network—was especially *tempting*! I could demand sexuality, but I couldn’t demand delight. Her delight is my delight, a communion of delight.

To tell her how I felt was utterly humiliating. “Susan, even though you don’t long for me, I still long for you. I lie awake all night; I watch you while you’re sleeping, just wishing, hoping, and praying that you would wake up and receive me.”

During that time, there were nights I remember thinking to myself, “Peter, just give up. Just give up. Give up on being lovers, and just settle on being roommates.” That temptation came from Hell.

By the grace of God, one night late I wrote my wife a letter. I told her how I felt—how I ached for her. I bared my soul.

God has written his sleeping Bride a letter. The name of the letter is *Jesus*—the Word of God. And look at Him: beaten, bloody, humiliated, exposed . . . the heart of the Living God hanging on an old Roman cross for the love of you—His Bride. Oh, when you see Him, He is easy to love.

Me?—I’m hard to love. But I did write to Susan and say, “This is my heart. Remember how you were when we were dating? When we were first married? Don’t say ‘I grew up in this kind of home so I’m not a hugger or kisser’! I *remember* the things you did at first. Do those things.”

Now, I need to tell you: My wife edits all my sermon material. My sermons are always *our* sermons; they come out of *our* life together. And it was my wife who reminded me of that letter. She reminded me of that letter because *that letter* gave her hope. It was a new beginning for us.

“Ephesus, Ephesus . . . Oh, Ephesus, remember what we had? Repent! And do those things that you did at first.”

And we say, “What *were* those things that they did at first in Ephesus?” . . . because if we

knew ‘em, we could do ‘em, and everything would be okay: our kingdom in order, prim and proper. Right? We would just establish a new denomination: First Church of the Things They Did First in Ephesus. And we would be as dead as ever.

We don’t know what they did at first! We’re not invited into their bedroom. Why? Because we are invited into *our* bedroom. Jesus has a unique relationship with every one of us. *And* He has a unique relationship with each church.

We don’t know exactly what they did in Ephesus, but whatever it was, they did it out of that first love. And God doesn’t want us to be simply stuck in first love, such that it never matures. He’s always drawing us into the deeper things of love. But that doesn’t mean He wants us to *lose* that first love.

When you are seventy-five, your passion for your spouse should be stronger than ever. It may not be sexual, but it should be more *intimate* than sexual. God’s goal is that you’ll be far more than roommates.

So Jesus says to Ephesus, “Remember, repent, and do the things you did at first.” And the question is, what is Jesus saying to *you*?

“Remember those hikes we used to take? And *you* probably didn’t even think of them as your devotional, but remember those hikes? You thought of *me* the whole time! Would you go hiking again?”

“Remember how you used to stay up late and *devour* my Word? You *memorized* it. Could you do that again?”

“Remember how you gave? You served me at the mission. Do that again.”

“Remember how you sang songs to me. Would you sing me a song?”

“Peter, remember how you used to see me in your kids every time you looked at them? You’ve forgotten to *look*. Take another look . . . I’m still there.”

In a few weeks, He may call you to something else. Did you notice that it was when Susan and I did exactly what we did on our first date, over and over and over again, that we got tired of each other? If we went snow-shoeing and ate picnics in tree houses for thirty years, we would *still* get tired of each other!

The point is, *work* at your relationship. Do the things that nurture your affections . . . your *first love*. That’s what Christian disciplines are about. Discipline yourself for affection.

When Susan and I turn into cold fish, I *know* there are things I need to do, whether I *feel* like it or not. I need to discipline myself to call a babysitter . . . arrange a dinner . . . buy some flowers . . . stop criticizing her . . . do some dishes . . . make a date. Those things are disciplines.

You say, “How do I get strength for those disciplines? Aren’t they just *new laws* and *dead works*?” No! Not if you discipline yourself in *hope* of that first love.

We all have different struggles, and this may be a silly example . . . I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, but the example works for me:

I am genetically engineered by God to weigh a lot. I think I have a base metabolic rate of two. At times I gain weight; at times I lose weight. When I lose weight, people come up to me and say, “You look so great! How did you *do* that?” I answer honestly: “I planned a romantic, tropical vacation with my wife.” But I don’t think people believe me.

You see, I’ve tried just about every diet in the world . . . Atkins’ Diet, the Slim Fast Diet, the Zone Diet, the Covert Baily Diet . . . Well, I have found the secret to losing weight. Are you ready? This is it: BE HUNGRY A LOT.

That’s a discipline! How do you find the strength to be hungry a lot? Plan a romantic, tropical vacation. I know we can’t *all* do that, but I *can*. I can from time to time plan a romantic, tropical vacation, and here’s what happens. I see the pizza, I look at the pizza . . . I *love* pizza . . . but then I think of a beach, my wife, and things I won’t tell you, and I put the pizza down in hope. No problem.

It’s to her credit, you see. Your discipline and morality must be to His credit. But please hear this: I don’t date my wife in order to lose weight. She is *not* a weight loss program. And I should not love Jesus in *order* to have a disciplined life. He is not a sin loss program. He is the Bridegroom.

I must discipline my life in the hope of communion with Jesus like I lose weight in the hope of communion with my wife.

But if the reservations are cancelled and I lose hope . . . watch out, Pizza Hut. Here I come!

Do you see the strategy of Satan? He whispers, “Honey, the reservations are cancelled. Not only that, but that deepest, most hungry longing of your soul for intimate, passionate communion is *evil*. Discipline it into oblivion.”

That’s not the voice of Jesus. He whispers, “You know that deepest longing of your soul for intimate, passionate communion? Honey, I *made* it because I made *you* for *me*. Ecstasy. Do you believe that? Reservation confirmed. Now *stay hungry* for me. The time is at hand.”

The call of singleness is not a call to passionless-ness. It’s a call to greater passion focused on Jesus. “Would you stay hungry for me?” If you are called to singleness, I believe that one morning Jesus will wake you up to such a loving that all eternity you will say, “Thank you, Jesus. I praise you that you saved me just for *you*.”

If you’re called to marriage, I believe Jesus will one day wake you up to such a loving that you’ll say, “Jesus, thank you that in marriage you prepared me for this. Thank you!”

So Satan whispers, “Discipline yourself in shame,” while Jesus whispers, “My beloved, discipline yourself in *hope*.”

“Ephesus” means “desired one.” “Ephesus, my desired one, do the things you did at first. To him who overcomes I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the paradise [that means “pleasure garden”] of God. Would you dream of that day? Believe in that day? You *will* overcome.”

I John 5:4: “This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for” (Hebrews 11:1). “And hope does not disappoint us” (Romans 5:5).

Revelation 19: “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure’—for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.”

Believe that! – That Jesus *saves* you; that He *washes* you; that He *forgives* you; that He *died* for you, cleansing you; that He *gives* you a white, wedding gown. So put it on in faith and

hope, and He will bear life in you. He doesn't want a roommate; He waits for a lover, the communion of delight.

Jesus romanced you all the way to that cross outside Jerusalem and even from the depths of Hell. So, in the name of Jesus, do a little romancing yourself this week. Amen.

Further Reading

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. . . . You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My delight is in her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a virgin, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

-Isaiah 61:11, 62:3-5

He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

-Ephesians 5:28b-33

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

-Revelation 19:6-8

How if this invasion of her own being in marriage from which she had recoiled, often in the very teeth of instinct, were not, as she has supposed, merely a relic of animal life or patriarchal barbarism, but rather the lowest, the first, and the easiest form of some shocking contact with reality which would have to be repeated—but in ever larger and more disturbing modes—on the highest levels of all? "Yes," said the Director. "There is no escape. If it were a virginal rejection of the male, He [God] would allow it. Such souls can bypass the male and go on to meet something far more masculine, higher up, to which they must make a yet deeper surrender. But your trouble has been what old poets called *Daungler*. We call it Pride. You are offended by the masculine itself: the loud, irruptive, possessive thing—the gold lion, the bearded bull—which breaks through hedges and scatters the little kingdom of your primness The male you could have escaped, for it exists only on the biological level. But the masculine none of us can escape. What is above and beyond all things is so masculine that we are all feminine in relation to it. You had better agree with your adversary quickly." "You mean I shall have to become a Christian?" said Jane. "It looks like it," said the Director. . . .

Then, at one particular corner of the gooseberry patch, the change came. . . . Something expectant, patient, inexorable, met her with no veil or protection between. In the closeness of that contact she perceived at once that the Director's words had been entirely misleading [good, but

misleading]. This demand which now pressed upon her was not, even by analogy, like any other demand. It was the origin of all right demands and contained them. . . . And as it closed, without an instant's pause, the voices of those who have not joy rose howling and chattering from every corner of her being. "Take care. Draw back. Keep your head. Don't commit yourself," they said. . . . But her defences had been captured and these counter-attacks were unsuccessful.

-C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*

At one time or another, though, most of us forget the Haunting, or try to; for it often threatens to cripple us, leaving us bent over and unable to deal with the everyday things that life requires to be done. We all, to some extent, take that shining something in us that felt magical and passionate as children, that something that later swirled amid the confusion of sexual passion and our longing for heart intimacy—we take it and push it through the loneliness, ache, and turmoil of life—through various stages of disconnection and hardness to another abiding place: a kind of resignation. There is something inside of us that says, "This is the way it is. I had better learn to deal with it." . . . If we were to try to picture the one who anesthetizes her heart to control life's Arrows as a wife, we would see a soul occupied by a seemingly redemptive busyness—involvement with her household and community that is productive and worthwhile. When her husband comes home from work, she is satisfied with a peck on the cheek and a few pleasant words about the day. She doesn't mind lovemaking if it's not too spontaneous but she rarely if ever pursues it. An evening of television or a good book would do just as well. Like Cinderella, she often settles into the lesser role of maid and housekeeper rather than risk rejection by wanting romance. Her husband will feel guilty—even accused—for wanting anything more with her. If he expresses his sadness over something lost in their love affair, she chides him for his melancholy spirit. . . . The desire God has placed within us is wild in its longing to pursue the One who is unknown. Its capacity and drive is so powerful that it can only be captured momentarily in moments of deep soul communion or sexual ecstasy. And when the moment has passed, we can only hold it as an ache, a haunting of quicksilver that flashes a remembrance of innocence known and lost and, if we have begun to pass into the life of the Beloved, a hope of ecstasies yet to come.

-Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, *The Sacred Romance*

Waking to Treasure

(Revelation 2:8-11)

Several years ago John C. Whitaker, the former United States Undersecretary of the Interior, flew into a small town in Nova Scotia for a fishing trip. The population swells to nine in the summer and stays steady at two during the winter. One of those two was an eighty-five-year-old woman named Mildred, whom Whitaker had known since he was twelve.

On this particular day, Miss Mildred welcomed Whitaker into her kitchen. They talked for a while, and Miss Mildred said, "Johnny, I hate to admit I don't know, but where is Washington?"

When Whitaker realized she wasn't kidding, he explained to her, "Mildred, Washington D.C. is where the President of the United States is. Washington is where the power is; where the wealth is." Then she asked, "How many people live there?" Whitaker responded, "About two million."

She said, "Hmmm . . . think of that! Two million people living so far away from everything."

Where *is* "everything"?

What *is* "everything"?

What *is* wealth, power, riches?

REVELATION 2:8: *"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.'"*

"To the angel of the church . . ." It's important to note that each of the messages to the seven churches is addressed to the angel of each church. "Angel" means "messenger." There has been a great debate about whether these "angelos" are human beings or whether they are what we usually think of as angels.

If it is a human messenger, some have speculated that the human being would be the pastor or bishop of that local church. In the case of Smyrna, we even know who that is: a man named Polycarp, who John knew as a young man.

However, it appears from John's usage that he almost certainly is referring to a spirit angel charged with the care of a particular church. So although this is a letter the churches will read, it appears Jesus is communicating through John to an angel with an assignment over a church, with a clear expectation the angel will get the message to the church.

How would that happen? Well, I would imagine through Bible studies, prayers, prophecies, and circumstances . . . through the gifts in each local body . . . the gifts of the Spirit. And maybe, just maybe, the seven spirits of the seven churches are . . .

The seven spirits of God

(seven being manifold fullness),

The seven spirits in front of the throne,

The seven eyes of the lamb that was slain, which are

The seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Whatever the case, we do know Jesus speaks to churches and through His Spirit applies His Word through the gifts in the members of each church. Each letter has this phrase addressed to the messenger—the angel: “Let those with ears to hear, hear what the spirit says to the churches.”

Now, how can you “hear what the Spirit says to the churches” if you are not a part of the church? I don’t just mean membership class, but bone, meat, sinew, joints . . . painful, vulnerable, life-giving, messy relationships.

I bet there is an angel assigned to Lookout Mountain Community Church. It also wouldn’t surprise me if there is an angel assigned to each small group within the church. Maybe that angel is even one of the seven spirits of Jesus sent out into all the world. Whatever the case, I believe Jesus speaks to me through this church and through my small group . . .

Through Mark, the thinker skeptic
Through Dee Dee, the mystic
Through Alan, the lover
Through Jennifer, the servant
Through Andrew, the evangelist
Through Ann, the healer
Through Susan, the wife

Jesus said, “You will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’” When my small group shows up in the name of the Lord, Jesus is there whether I’m aware of it or not. The question is, Do I have eyes to see and ears to hear so that I might say, “Blessed are you, Andrew, who comes in the name of the Lord”?

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna . . .” We know quite a bit about Smyrna from the writings of Polycarp, from ancient history, and because it’s still there. It was about thirty-five miles north of Ephesus, a wealthy and beautiful city with large, glorious boulevards. The most famous of those boulevards was called the Golden Street.

However, it was very dangerous for Christians to walk on that street, for Smyrna was one of the most dangerous places for a Christian to live in all the Roman Empire.

In 26 A.D., Smyrna won the right to erect a temple to the Emperor of Tiberius. It was a center for Caesar worship.

Smyrna was the center of a large Jewish population that had a strong influence on the Roman authorities. Because Judaism was a recognized and official religion, Jews were exempt from emperor worship. The early Christians considered themselves Jews—“heirs of the promise.” However, if the Jews wanted the Christians out of their synagogues or felt threatened by their influence, they only had to turn them over to the Romans saying, “They say they are Jews, but they’re not.” Then the Christians would be subject to the confiscation of property, persecution, and death.

REVELATION 2:8-9: *“And to the angel of the church of Smyrna write: ‘The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life. I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not. They are not Jews but are a synagogue of Satan.’”*

Jesus says, “I know your tribulation and poverty, and the slander you suffer. But *you* are rich.” It appears they had great spiritual qualities in Smyrna, so we can expect God to bless them. They will be *rich*. Because they had been faithful in Philadelphia, Jesus tells them He will keep them from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world.

Most American, evangelical Christians believe that God will deliver us from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world—the Great Tribulation. They believe in the Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the Church. They believe God will rescue us from that great trial.

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you . . .” (Jeremiah 29:11). God’s plan *is* prosperity. God *will* make His faithful Church *rich*.

REVELATION 2:10-11: *“[Smyrna,] do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you in prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.”*

“Be faithful unto death.” Yikes! Is that prosperity?

Smyrna is the most faithful of all the churches, so they get more tribulation and persecution . . . and some get death. Hopefully you did notice that Jesus didn’t say, “You’re poor and *going* to be rich”; He said, “You are *already* rich.”

Do you ever get the feeling while reading the Bible that we really don’t know what riches are? If we do, we’re not so sure we want them! “To him who has, more will be given.” Ouch. Sorry, Smyrna. But meet in Laodicea and we’ll have a slide show on the sufferings in Smyrna . . . take a collection, say a prayer . . . “Oh, Lord, help those poor people.” *Poor people*.

Who is poor? Who is rich?

Soren Kierkegaard told about a most evil thief who would break into jewelry stores and switch all the price tags. (Of course, he didn’t care about jewels, gold, and pearls. He just hated the owner and all his customers.) Because the price tags were switched, young men gave cheap plastic to their brides; poor folks wore diamonds and precious jewels and didn’t even know it. Of course, eventually the cheap stuff was exposed (destroyed in a fire or worn out with time), and the valuable stuff was lost through neglect.

Kierkegaard’s point is that maybe this entire world is like that store where all the price tags have been switched. Maybe we’re “born again” even as children, and we don’t know what’s valuable and what’s not.

When my son Coleman was a toddler, he was constantly getting disciplined for eating dirt. I can picture his precious, little face streaked with tears, dirt caked around his lips, suffering

immensely because he got another spanking for eating dirt. A house full of great food, and he was outside eating dirt!

Of course, it's not his fault. He was born with a propensity toward eating dirt. He inherited bad genes from his Aunt Lydia. In 1968, Lydia used to sit in front of our house in Littleton with some Tupperware, making cakes out of the manure my dad purchased to fertilize our yard. A house full of great food, and she was outside eating manure!

Maybe we're like that: Born again, even as babies, sticking anything in our mouths (an inherited problem), as if somewhere in our family tree someone got addicted to bad fruit. An entire garden full of great and wonderful fruit, and someone had to go and eat that one problem fruit. Since then, we've been outside the garden eating dirt.

Maybe our Father wants us to come inside and stop eating dirt. Maybe we don't know what's good . . . what's rich . . . where everything really is. In Smyrna, Jesus said, "You are rich." In Laodicea where they claim to be rich, Jesus says, "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

What are riches?

Last week in Ephesus, Jesus mourned their poverty of first love. (They had lost that "loving feeling.") Scholars debate whether that was affectionate love toward Jesus or affectionate love toward each other.

It's a silly debate, for the first commandment is "Love God," and the second is like it: "Love your neighbor." God in Jesus in His Spirit is *in* your neighbor. Last week we preached that we are to discipline ourselves in the hope of that treasure.

So why were they rich in Smyrna?

- Tribulation and poverty expose need, which forces the disciplines of relationship.
- Relationship opens the door for love and communion (great riches).
- Tribulation and poverty force us to rely on people.
- People are like a field of dirt that contains treasure.
- Storms wash away the dirt and expose the treasure.

A first-grader went on her first day to a newly integrated school at the height of the segregation storm. An anxious mother met her at the door to inquire, "How did everything go, honey?"

"Oh, Mother! You know what? A little black girl sat next to me!"

In fear and trepidation, the mother expected trauma but tried to ask calmly, "And what happened?"

"We were both so scared that we held hands all day."

Buried treasure.

In one of Philip Yancey's books, he tells about a poll of senior citizens in London. They

were asked, “What was the happiest period of your life?” Sixty percent answered, “The Blitz.” The Blitz was that period during World War II when German bombers dumped tons of explosives on the city of London every night.

These people huddled together in bomb shelters in small groups while Nazis destroyed all their earthly possessions with fire from the sky. In those bomb shelters, they learned faith; they experienced hope; they knew the pain and joy of love.

They were rich.

The tribulation and the poverty weren’t the riches. They *exposed* the riches: faith, hope, and love. “Although this world burns away,” writes the Apostle Paul, “they will remain.”

Faith in Jesus,
Hope in Jesus,
Love that *is* Jesus—
Treasure.

The jewel exposed by the fire,
The gold refined by the furnace,
The treasure unearthed by the storm.

Treasure is in people, and it is exposed by suffering.

Do you want to be rich? Join a small group and thank God for Nazi bombers. Jesus said, “Trials will come, but woe to him by whom they come.”

In Smyrna, the Devil *will* throw them into prison. *Woe* to the Devil and the Nazis, but *glory* to the Church. God has the Devil on a leash. God uses him to uncover His treasure in Job . . . in Joseph . . . in Smyrna. His glory is faith, hope, and love through Christ in us.

“Our faith is more precious than gold, which though perishable is tested by fire,” writes Peter. “The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, and the Lord tries hearts” (Proverbs 17:3).

To the lukewarm, rich, and very poor church in Laodicea, Jesus says, “Buy from me gold, refined by fire, that you may be rich; white garments and salve to anoint your eyes.” How do they get gold in Laodicea? The same way they do in Smyrna: Invite Him in.

To the church at Laodicea Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and him with me.” In Laodicea, they had just as much treasure as Smyrna; they just weren’t letting Him in. Why? They thought they had no need. They were blind to the treasure and deaf to His voice, so they would not say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

They couldn’t see Him.

If you want to be rich, join a small group (or something like it). And thank God for the

storms. Storms wash away dirt. Maybe God is weaning us from dirt.

At the end of the Revelation, there is the strangest picture: An eternal city, which is also a bride. It gets really weird in chapter twenty-one: “The gates of the city will never be shut by day, and there shall be no night there” (Revelation 21:25). The gates are *always open*.

Then in Revelation 22:15, Jesus says, “Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood” — that is, everyone who loves to *eat dirt*.

Just think of it: Doors *wide open* to riches beyond belief, the richest food and wine, the Great Banquet, but they don’t go in. Why? Maybe they don’t *want* to. They *like* eating dirt. Maybe the kingdom is something like an acquired taste.

So now God in His grace and mercy is weaning us from dirt, bad apples, gold watches, big houses, the riches of this world . . . and trying to show us real treasure. You say, “What’s *wrong* with dirt, apples, gold watches, and big houses?” Actually nothing! It’s just that we are addicted to them.

The fruit of the knowledge of good and evil wasn’t bad, but we *coveted* it. Gold watches aren’t evil; it’s that we love them more than we love hungry people. Things and riches of this world aren’t evil in themselves; it’s that we *use* people to love *things* instead of using those *things* to love *people*.

Use dirt to grow food but eat the food.

Use money to grow people and love the people.

Dirt isn’t evil; fertilizer isn’t evil.

We would all die without it; we just shouldn’t *eat* it!

My son Coleman is now six years old, so on Christmas morning I woke him up early. (His eyes were wide with anticipation.) I took him downstairs and out back behind our house, and I said, “Coleman, this morning I’m giving you what you’ve always wanted! All the dirt in the back yard belongs to you! Chow down!”

Actually I didn’t do that. Why? Because through my discipline, Coleman has acquired a taste for prime rib, cherry pie, rich food; electric trains, pogo sticks, Nintendo games under the tree.

What a living Hell if my son Coleman spent all Christmas morning out back eating dirt while his family feasted inside! I would lay aside my feast, my kingdom, and my house, and go sit in the dirt with him until he came inside. That would *really* be Christmas.

Now it’s safe to give Coleman dirt. He still *likes* dirt; he just no longer wants to *eat* it.

On your Easter morning, your Heavenly Father will say something like this to you: “My church from Smyrna, remember that street in your town called the Golden Street? Do you remember how you longed to strut down that street but had to fear your life? Look, my beloved! This street is made of gold, and you own it!” But, you see, you won’t be looking at the streets; you will have acquired a taste for Jesus—the Lamb who was slain. You’ll be dancing on those streets but looking at Him! And He won’t be entirely unfamiliar to you, because you acquired a taste for Him *here . . . in Smyrna*.

A couple of weeks ago I went to visit John Lowell, who is eighty-two, in the hospital. John has serious heart problems, and he had just received some very bad medical news.

I said, “John, are you ready to meet Jesus?” And John bellowed, “Oh yeah. He’ll heal me, or He’ll take me home.” We prayed, and I felt *rich*. What faith! It’s *Jesus*.

I went downstairs and saw Marcia. She had been on death’s door the night before. All she could talk about was some visions and the book of the Revelation. I thought, “What hope!” It’s

Jesus. Treasure in an earthen vessel.

Around that time, we got a call at the office. Michael Chowdry's plane had crashed near Centennial Airport. Michael was the owner of Atlas Air and was extremely successful. His wife Linda was one of our elders years ago. When I saw Linda, I didn't know *what* to expect. She had just found out she was widowed with two small children. When she saw me, she gave me a big hug and said, "Oh, Peter, I'm just so thankful to God that He let me have Michael for twenty years." And I had nothing to say. Such faith, hope, love! It's Jesus. And I was rich because Linda was rich. Maybe she's never been that rich.

Smyrna, you are rich!

Not just *have* riches –

Smyrna, you *are* riches.

There was a letter written around 160 A.D. by the church in Smyrna to circulate among the churches in Asia Minor. It is a letter of great joy and gratitude for all that God had done recently in Smyrna. It recounts how twelve believers had recently been martyred, eleven scourged and devoured by beasts in the coliseum of Smyrna, and how it was obvious Christ was with them.

Paul wrote, "All things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's." Where is everything? — In Smyrna, where Christ suffers.

The letter goes on to describe the death of the twelfth martyr, the eighty-six-year-old bishop of Smyrna, the one who knew John as a young man, the one who no doubt

had read the Revelation aloud so many times in that small church.

They decided to burn the eighty-six-year-old Polycarp. Jews from the synagogue gathered the wood for the fire . . . tied him to a post . . . he prayed thanking God that he was counted worthy to suffer—to share—in the cup of Christ *with* Christ.

When they lit the fire, witnesses say it encompassed Polycarp like a sail in the wind, and it would not consume him. Finally, in desperation, the executioner thrust a spear in Polycarp's side. But while the fire raged around him, witnesses said he appeared "not as flesh that is burnt but as bread that is baked, as gold and silver glowing in a furnace."

You see . . . He was gold.

He was rich.

Smyrna is rich.

Jesus said, "The kingdom is like a treasure buried in a field, and a man stumbles upon it and sells everything for the field." The people of God are that field! And then He said, "The kingdom is like a pearl merchant [not a *pearl* but a *pearl merchant*], and when he finds the pearl of great price, he gives up everything." He gives up his kingdom for the pearl.

I believe Jesus is the pearl merchant, who gives up His kingdom for the pearl. The Church is His pearl—His inheritance—His riches.

A pearl is formed in suffering;

It is riches wrapped around a wound.
The Church is faith, hope, and love
Wrapped around the wounded body of Christ.

“Smyrna, you are rich.” Revelation 21:21: “And the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made of a single pearl, and the street of the city was pure gold, transparent as glass.” And the city was adorned with twelve jewels. *Twelve!*

Bonus Church Trivia:___

Question: Who was the Bishop of Smyrna about one hundred years after Polycarp died?

Answer: His name was Nicholas. We call him “Saint Nicholas.” Smyrna is rich! They even have Santa Claus!

The Circulating Letter of the Church at Smyrna Concerning the Martyrdom of the Holy Polycarp

We have written to you, brethren, as to what relates to the martyrs, and especially to the blessed Polycarp, who put an end to the persecution, having, as it were, set a seal upon it by his martyrdom. For almost all the events that happened previously [to this one], took place that the Lord might show us from above a martyrdom becoming the Gospel. . . .

And truly, who can fail to admire their nobleness of mind, and their patience, with that love towards their Lord which they displayed?—who, when they were so torn with scourges, that the frame of their bodies, even to the very inward veins and arteries, was laid open, still patiently endured, while even those that stood by pitied and bewailed them. But they reached such a pitch of magnanimity, that not one of them let a sigh or a groan escape them; thus proving to us all that those holy martyrs of Christ, at the very time when they suffered such torments, were absent from the body, or rather, that the Lord then stood by them, and communed with them. . . .

Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, “Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ”; Polycarp declared, “Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?”

But again the proconsul said to him, “I will cause thee to be consumed by fire, seeing thou despisest the wild beasts, if thou wilt not repent.” But Polycarp said, “Thou threatenest me with fire which burneth for an hour, and after a little is extinguished, but art ignorant of the fire of the coming judgment and of eternal punishment, reserved for the ungodly. But why tarriest thou? Bring forth what thou wilt.”

While he spoke these and many other like things, he was filled with confidence and joy, and his countenance was full of grace, so that not merely did it not fall as if troubled by the things said to him, but, on the contrary, the proconsul was astonished, and sent his herald to proclaim in the midst of the stadium thrice, “Polycarp has confessed that he is a Christian.” This proclamation having been made by the herald, the whole multitude both of the heathen and Jews, who dwelt at Smyrna, cried out with uncontrollable fury, and in a loud voice, “This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, and the overthrower of our gods, he who has been teaching many not to sacrifice, or to worship the gods.”

Then it seemed good to them to cry out with one consent, that Polycarp should be burnt alive. For thus it behooved the vision which was revealed to him in regard to his pillow to be fulfilled, when, seeing it on fire as he was praying, he turned about and said prophetically to the faithful that were with him, “I must be burnt alive.”

This, then, was carried into effect with greater speed than it was spoken, the multitudes immediately gathering together wood and fagots out of the shops and baths; the Jews especially, according to custom, eagerly assisting them in it. . . .

Immediately then they surrounded him with those substances which had been prepared for the funeral pile. But when they were about also to fix him with nails, he said, “Leave me as I am; for He that giveth me strength to endure the fire, will also enable me, without your securing me by nails, to remain without moving in the pile.”

They did not nail him then, but simply bound him. And he, placing his hands behind him, and being bound like a distinguished ram [taken] out of a great flock for sacrifice, and prepared to be an acceptable burnt-offering unto God, looked up to heaven, and said, “O Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy beloved and blessed Son Jesus Christ, by whom we have received the knowledge of Thee, the God of angels and powers, and of every creature, and of the whole race of the righteous who live before thee, I give Thee thanks that Thou hast counted me worthy of this day and this

hour, that I should have a part in the number of Thy martyrs, in the cup of Thy Christ, to the resurrection of eternal life, both of soul and body, through the incorruption [imparted] by the Holy Ghost. Among whom may I be accepted this day before Thee as a fat and acceptable sacrifice, according as Thou, the ever-truthful God, hast fore-ordained, hast revealed beforehand to me, and now hast fulfilled. Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen.”

When he had pronounced this *amen*, and so finished his prayer, those who were appointed for the purpose kindled the fire. And as the flame blazed forth in great fury, we, to whom it was given to witness it, beheld a great miracle, and have been preserved that we might report to others what then took place. For the fire, shaping itself into the form of an arch, like the sail of a ship when filled with the wind, encompassed as by a circle the body of the martyr. And he appeared within not like flesh which is burnt, but as bread that is baked, or as gold and silver glowing in a furnace. Moreover, we perceived such a sweet odour [coming from the pile], as if frankincense or some such precious spices had been smoking there.

At length, when those wicked men perceived that his body could not be consumed by the fire, they commanded an executioner to go near and pierce him through with a dagger. And on his doing this, there came forth . . . great quantity of blood, so that the fire was extinguished; and all the people wondered that there should be such a difference between the unbelievers and the elect, of whom this most admirable Polycarp was one, having in our own times been an apostolic and prophetic teacher, and bishop of the Catholic [Universal] Church which is in Smyrna. . . .

Waking to Your Name

(Revelation 2:12-17)

Pastor Robert Fulghum tells of the day he was left in charge of about eighty children in the church fellowship hall. He had to keep them under control, so he had them play a game called Giant Wizard Dwarf, kind of an enacted version of Rock Paper Scissors, where each child had to take the name of giant, wizard, or dwarf and then act out that name with a surprise partner to see who won.

Kids were running everywhere. He yelled out, “You have to decide now which you are, giant, wizard, or dwarf!” As the children took their places, he saw a little girl standing in front of him. She looked up and asked in a small, very concerned voice, “Where do the mermaids stand?” Fulgham didn’t know what to say.

“Where do the *mermaids* stand?” he repeated.

“Yes,” she said. “You see, I am a mermaid.”

“There are no such things as mermaids,” Fulgham said.

“Oh yes! I *am* one,” the little girl responded.

She knew she wasn’t a giant, wizard, or dwarf; she was a *mermaid*. And she was not about to leave the game and go stand where a loser would stand. She knew her name. She knew her identity. She took it as an a priori fact that mermaids fit into the grand scheme of things and that Mr. Fulgham (the king of the game) would know exactly where that spot was.

I wonder how she knew she was a mermaid. And wouldn’t you like to know your name like she knew hers?

It used to be that if you asked my daughter Becky her name, she would say, “My name is Pretty Pretty Princess.” She knew that was her name because her father called her by that name, and it fit. She no longer goes by that name. She’s older. She’s in elementary school, and there they call her by other names.

REVELATION 2:12-13: “*And to the angel of the church in Per'gamum write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.'*”

That’s Jesus, and in Revelation 19 the sword issues from His mouth, and with it He will smite the nations. He will judge—separate—name—the nations: sheep, goats, giants, wizards, dwarfs . . . mermaids.

“*I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is . . .*”

Pergamum was the capital of the Roman province of Asia.

“You hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of An'tipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.”

Jesus calls Antipas “my faithful witness.” We don’t know how Antipas died. There are some traditions, but whatever the case, he must have died because he would not renounce the name of Jesus and worship the name of Caesar. When he died, there were undoubtedly many spectators, probably in the coliseum, chanting names at Antipas. To control the mob, Rome gave out white stones as tickets to the coliseum to get free bread and watch people die.

Jesus commends the church in Pergamum for “holding fast his name.” Names are really big in the Bible. In scripture, everything is created just with words and names. In Hebrew, “dabar” is “word,” but that word really means “thing.” A word is a thing and likewise a name is an extension of a thing. God makes “a place for His name to dwell on the earth.” His name is a revelation of Himself, and His name has power.

By the time of Jesus, the Israelites would not even say the name of God—that is, “Yahweh”—just for fear of taking it in vain.

Well, now God has revealed Himself in Jesus—the Word, and through Him all things were made. God has given Him “the name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

He’s also called the Second Adam. When God first makes Adam, the first man, He has Adam name all the animals, “which was asking Adam to help in the creation of their wholeness,” as Madeleine L’Engle puts it. He names the animals. We call it science or taxonomy.

Then when God makes the woman, Adam names her “woman” or “Eve.” They have children and name them.

In Scripture, people usually get their formal names from a father or a husband. I know that sounds paternalistic and sexist, but the Bible seems kind of paternalistic and sexist. (So just consider that maybe it speaks a truth that if we really understood we’d love . . . like a blessed child loves his name, like a beloved bride loves her new name. But as orphans and widows we mourn.)

Well, Adam is a namer of things before the Fall. He is still a namer of things after the Fall, but his naming is fallen. He does it very poorly; he makes orphans and widows. So lots of brides don’t take their husband’s names, and that’s understandable. Children renounce the name of their father.

In scripture, names work like mirrors that reflect back the essence of a thing. But more than that, they help create a thing. “No longer shall you be called Simon, but Peter—Rock.” (You are Rock, and one day three years from now you’ll act like one.)

Abraham: Father of Nations

Sarah: Mother of Nations

Israel: Strives with God

God is always giving new names.

Sometimes we get evil names: worthless, moron, no good. Good or bad, names still cut,

shape, create, and perhaps desecrate. Good or bad, we name and get named and try to make names for ourselves . . . because even a bad name seems more desirable than no name at all. I think to never hear another call your name would be Hell. Maybe that *is* Hell: to be finally and ultimately orphaned or widowed.

At the Fall, humanity was cut off from the Father and cut off from the Great Bridegroom. Now we're desperate for "a name." And even a bad name seems better than no name.

Bobby Fisher shared with all of us how one summer as a kid he spent all his time hidden in a little fort by himself. He told me last week, "You know, I got into all the drugs and stuff, but the funny thing was, I didn't really care about all those drugs. The reason I got into them was because I wanted a friend . . . a crowd . . . a name."

And even a bad name is better than no name, it seems.

In Genesis 11, all those orphaned and widowed from the Garden get together and say, "Let's make a name for ourselves and build a tower to Heaven." God comes down and destroys their tower and their name.

Maybe you've been building a tower called success, or whatever, in order to make a name for yourself. Well, don't be surprised if God comes and knocks it down. Maybe He still has another name for you.

Isaiah prophesied of the day that the towers of Jerusalem would be torn down. It happened in 586 B.C. at the hands of the Babylonians, and it happened in 70 A.D. at the hands of the Romans. Jerusalem was an arrogant, adulterous, and frigid bride.

Isaiah prophesied, "Instead of perfume there will be rotteness . . . Your men shall fall by the sword . . . ravaged, she shall sit upon the ground. And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, 'We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach.'"

God takes away their arrogant name, the name they made for themselves, but so desperate are they for a name, they'll sleep with any man that comes along.

But in Isaiah 62:1-2, God says through Isaiah, "For Jerusalem's sake I will not rest . . . The nations shall see your vindication and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall give you."

Maybe God is stripping us of arrogant names and evil names, names that don't fit, so that we can finally hear Him call our real name. Yet in that process we're desperate for any name, like the women of Jerusalem who would go to

bed with any man just to get a name—*any* name; bow down to *any* god in order to have a name—*any* name.

REVELATION 2:13-14: *"You held fast my name . . . But [Pergamum] I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality."*

Balaam taught King Balak to entice the people of Israel into intermarrying with Midianites and Moabites, and into worshipping their gods, so that Israel would no longer be a threat to Midian

and Moab. They wouldn't attack Moab, for part of their own name would be Moab.

Well, in Pergamum it appears that some there taught that a little sex outside your marriage covenant won't hurt; a little worship of Caesar or Zeus won't hurt. In the Revelation, it is hard to tell sometimes whether it's talking about sexual immorality or idolatry. That's because idolatry *is* adultery—going after another bridegroom in search of a name.

So some may be sleeping with pagan temple prostitutes; some may be married to Caesar—the powers of this world. They are doing things to fit in, be accepted, and have a name: giant, wizard, dwarf . . . a reputation in Pergamum.

Married to the ways of this world for a name, whether that's sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll; or the Republican or Democratic parties; or the stock market; or *Vogue* magazine; or Fortune 500 . . . if that's where you get your name, you're in trouble, trapped by old King Balak and a Dragon.

To name something is to exert power over that something. It is to judge, divide, quantify, and bring under control; categorize. The world and its Beast and Dragon want to name you: "Oh, he's one of those conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical, homophobic, early potty-trained, religious types."

We use psychology, sociology, and anthropology to name people:

Those tribal, animistic, Bronze Age thinkers

The Proletariat

The Middle Class

The Black Voter

The Introvert

The Extrovert

Giant

Wizard

Dwarf

Did you ever notice that when someone is a threat, we love to name them? "Oh, she's a borderline schizophrenic." Since we named her, we don't have to listen to her.

God told us to name animals (biology). But we had better not get too cocky with anthropology, psychology, and sociology: naming people; for God seems to really get uptight about how we name people—judge people.

Well, what names has this world given you? What names has the crowd given you? Success? Failure? Rich? Poor? Satan loves to name you, because names catch people, control people, and shape people.

This world and the Beast and the Ancient Dragon love to name us, and we're susceptible to names: orphaned and widowed. We believe those names, so desperate are we for names.

When I was a child, I wasn't a giant, wizard, or dwarf. I was named Fatso and Pussy. I used to ride the bus home from school and get teased mercilessly. It all started when I was seven and kissed Leslie Brown in the tree in her front yard. (Tim Wren did too, but he turned on me.) All the kids in the bus would sing, "Two little lovers sittin' in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in a baby carriage." They would choose me to fight, and I never

wanted to fight. I didn't know how, and I was scared.

I was a minister's kid, and one other thing: I didn't cuss. So they had another name for me, and I just hated it: Mr. Decent. Decent was a bad thing to be in 1968 in the second grade. So sometimes I would try to be a little indecent to shake the name. I did a really rude thing to a lonely girl (in front of the class, on a dare). I got caught, and my heart just broke for that girl. (In fact, I wrote her a letter of apology last summer. I didn't mail it; it was for God and me.)

I really had trouble being indecent. So mostly I just curled up inside, hidden, silently hating myself, ashamed of my name — Mr. Decent. I wouldn't have made it except I could go home where I had a name and a good father. I don't know how some of you made it. It must be the grace of God your Father.

You know, oftentimes when I've preached, afterwards I just have the hardest time not hating myself and curling up in shame. Now please hear me: It really has very little to do with criticism or compliments. It's that I know I'm being named (mostly very good names). But being addicted to the names of the mob, I'm terrified. Just the knowledge I'm being named by fickle people (like Tim Wren), and my heart goes right back to that bus in 1968. Fear, shame, self-hatred . . . and I don't want to preach anymore. I just want to go curl up under a broom tree and whisper, "Oh God—just kill me."

See how that Dragon works? Even good names get twisted.

**Good wine can lead to drunkenness;
Good food can be received as gluttony;
A good name can be idolatry.**

Listen closely: The one we let name us is our idol.

REVELATION 2:15-16: *"So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicola'itans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth."*

We really don't know who the Nicolaitans were; however, it's interesting to note that "Nicolaitan" is two Greek words: "nicos" meaning "superior" or "conqueror," and "laity" meaning "people." Together it means Conqueror of the People, or Superior to the People.

So some have speculated that this group was the beginning of the clergy laity split: that is, two classes of Christians — the clergy judges and defines the laity: tells them their name. Now, it's clear that God calls people into places of authority in His Church but never as despot or judge of persons.

What I'm saying is, I can't tell you your name. I can help you find your name (as a brother), but in the end I don't know your name . . . even though it would make my job easier. For, you see, sometimes I think my job is to keep order in the fellowship hall: dragons, wizards, dwarfs all in a row. And sometimes you want that to be my job, because you want to know your name. "Tell me where to stand and what to do and who exactly I am."

That's nice for a while, but still it's idolatry.

When I was in college, I went to a Campus Crusade retreat. I had been a Christian a long time, but because it was my first Crusade retreat, I had to get a *red folder*. You see, they

had red folders, blue folders, and green folders. Red was for new Christians; blue for medium Christians; green for advanced Christians.

Because I was so ashamed, Dave Jones and I snuck into the staff area and stole green folders . . . to prove our maturity in Christ; that is, to make ourselves a name.

You see, it was wrong to reduce all our relationships with Christ to red, blue, or green folders. Can you see Jesus doing that? But what was really wrong was that I coveted the green folder. I let them *name* me Red or Green.

I'm still the same way. I just got back from the National Pastor's Conference, and I so wanted them to name me Good Pastor. Well, the conference was great. But I have to tell you . . .

After the first speaker, I thought, "I should be like him and pastor a small church."

After another speaker, I thought, "I should be writing books."

After another speaker, I thought, "I need to work in the inner city."

After the last speaker, I thought, "If I was really what God wanted, a Good Pastor, I would be a Wycliffe Bible Translator in Papua, New Guinea!"

On the way home, I felt a bit confused and condemned, wondering, "What's my name?" I remember thinking on the plane, "I wonder if that's how the folks in church feel?"

One week: "You need to join a small group."

One week: "You need to give ten percent."

One week: "You need to pray for two hours a night."

They're all good things, but you begin to feel like a category or a project . . . dehumanized. You wonder, "Does anybody know me? Do I have to be a giant, wizard, or dwarf?"

I was looking out the plane window and thought about my small group. A few months ago they prayed for me. They prayed for me about my shame after I preach. In prayer, we went back to where I thought those feelings came from: the bus. And they prayed that I could picture Jesus on that bus and have faith in His presence.

I imagined Him there as best I could, and they asked, "What's He doing? What does He think?" I said, "I don't know, but I think he's laughing, not at me but *for* me, like all those names just don't matter."

I told my small group what they called me: Decent. My friend Dee Dee said, "I think Jesus is proud of you. Decent isn't so bad."

And something in me broke. It had never occurred to me, honestly never occurred to me, that Decent could be a good name.

I realized then that Decent was a name for Jesus, and I had been decent (in my own, little, childish way) because I really liked Jesus. Jesus was being decent in me. *Our* name was Decent. My name wasn't Coward or Pussy. In fact, it was Peter the Rock. And even then He was shaping me into Rock. Our name is Rock.

REVELATION 2:17: "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.*"

Scholars debate whether that new name is a name for God or Jesus, or whether that new name is our individual name. There is great evidence for both views, and I'm convinced both views are correct. The new name will be your name *and* Jesus' name. Dare I even say it?—*God's* name is the same name. We are the children of God, and we are the Bride of Christ. (We're even His body—His city—His New Jerusalem.)

The name *faithful witness* is only given to two people in all of scripture. Jesus calls Antipas of Pergamum "my faithful witness," and in the last chapter, Jesus calls Himself "the faithful witness." Faithful witness is their name, and they have another name. All eternity Antipas will be trying to tell you that name, and all eternity you will be trying to tell Antipas another name: the one Jesus shares with you.

You, Antipas, and all the saints sing the same song, the song of the Lamb. But you each have different parts, to make it a symphony.

I believe that in this world Jesus is beginning to tell you your name so you'll recognize it on that great day when you first hear it. Now other people may be used by Him to help name you. But they can never finally name you. Do not let them! They do not know your name. It's unique.

Three weeks ago after the service, Prayer Team folks wanted to pray for me. They even named the dragon: fear over receiving names.

In that prayer, a Prayer Team member prayed, "Lord, thank you that Peter is your favorite person in all the world," and I thought, "He's right!" Then he prayed for Aram and said, "Lord, thank you that Aram is your favorite person in all the world," and I thought, "He's right!"

You say, "That can't be right. There can't be two favorites!" *Wrong*. There can't be two favorites in Flatland (not if you're stuck in space and time), but our God loves us from eternity, and He names us from eternity.

Moms and dads even taste it, because it feels like each of our children is our favorite, not because they are all *tied*—they are not the same—but because we share our name with each of them.

Believe the name your Father gives you in Christ Jesus our Lord. How will you know it when you hear it? Well, it will fit on Jesus—the resurrected Jesus. You share it, and if you belong to Christ, He's been everywhere you have been and in every situation. He wants to tell you your name from each place. You say, "I've been to some awful, awful places. I've been to Hell and back." So has Jesus. Your story is His story and your name. He covers you in righteousness—His grace—His name on you.

Listen for His names given in grace. Do not listen to the Dragon and his Beast and this world. Don't listen to the mob in the coliseum in Pergamum chanting names.

One day you'll get a white stone (a ticket), and you'll enter the coliseum of God with the great cloud of witnesses and eat the bread of life and the hidden manna. Jesus will speak — "Read the stone," you'll hear *your name* for the first time, and you'll know you're home at your Father's table—your Bridegroom's table—the King's table.

Robert Fulghum stood there a while not knowing what to say to the mermaid in the church fellowship hall. "Were do the mermaids stand?" Then he writes:

Every once in a while I say the right thing. "The mermaid stands right here by the King of the Sea," says I. So we stood there hand in hand reviewing the troops of wizards, giants, and dwarfs. It is not true (by the way)

that mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand.

Revelation 21: “And I saw the new Jerusalem coming down adorned as a bride for her husband. . . . And he who sat on the throne said, ‘I make all things new’ and ‘It is done!’ He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

“[The New Jerusalem] had a great, high wall, with twelve gates [twelve is our number], and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

If you have faith in Jesus, you will conquer, and you have a name written in that city. It's there right *now*.

Child of God, maybe you heard names that fill you with fear, shame, and self-hatred, names spoken by the Enemy, and you cursed yourself. Give them to Jesus. He will change the meaning of those names or give new names. Believe that Jesus names you. Believe it, or you'll hop in the sack with any demon that comes along.

Further Reading

God asked Adam to name all the animals, which was asking Adam to help in the creation of their wholeness. When we name each other, we are sharing in the joy and privilege of incarnation . . .

Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him. . . . Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

-Genesis 2:19-20, 23

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth." So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. . . . Therefore its name was called Ba'bel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

-Genesis 11:4, 8-9

And seven women shall take hold of one man in that day, saying, "We will eat our own bread and wear our own clothes, only let us be called by your name; take away our reproach."

-Isaiah 4:1

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the LORD will give.

-Isaiah 62:1-2

When she had weaned Not pitied, she conceived and bore a son. And the LORD said, "Call his name Not my people, for you are not my people and I am not your God." Yet the number of the people of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which can be neither measured nor numbered; and in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Sons of the living God."

-Hosea 1:8-10

To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

-John 10:3

This signature on each soul may be a product of heredity and environment, but that only means that heredity and environment are among the instruments whereby God creates a soul. I am considering not how, but why, He makes each soul unique. If He had no use for all these differences, I do not see why He should have created more soul than one. Be sure that the ins and outs of your individuality are no mystery to Him; and one day they will no longer be a mystery to you. The mould in which a key is made would be a strange thing, if you had never seen a lock. Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. For it is not humanity in the abstract that is to be saved, but you—you, the individual reader, John Stubbs or Janet Smith. Blessed and fortunate creature, your eyes shall behold Him and not another's. . . . "To him that overcometh I will give a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it." What can be more a man's own than this new name which even in eternity remains a secret between God and him? And what shall we take this secrecy to mean? Surely, that each of the redeemed shall forever know and praise some one aspect of the divine beauty better than any other creature can. Why else were individuals created, but that God, loving all infinitely, should love each differently? And this difference, so far from impairing, floods with meaning the love of all blessed creatures for one another, the communion of the saints. If all experienced God in the same way and returned Him an identical worship, the song of the Church triumphant would have no symphony, it would be like an orchestra in which all the instruments played the same note. Aristotle has told us that a city is a unity of unlikes, and St. Paul that a body is a unity of different members. Heaven is a city, and a Body, because the blessed remain eternally different: a society, because each has something to tell all the others—fresh and ever fresh news of the "My God" whom each finds in Him whom all praise as "Our God."

-C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

God loves each one of us as though there were no one else to love.

-St. Augustine

He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

-Revelation 3:12

It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

-Revelation 21:12-14

I know where you live--where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city--where Satan lives.

-Revelation 2:13

. . . and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . .

-Revelation 1:5

Waking to Love

(Revelation 2:18-29)

I first thought of asking my wife Susan on a date while walking behind her on the stairs between the second and third floors at Heritage High School in 1977. She was wearing very nicely fitting, white, polyester pants. I remember thinking, “A *goddess* . . . Venus in white, polyester pants.”

On our first date, I pretty much just thought, “Wow . . . she’s *gorgeous!*” I think she pretty much just thought, “Wow . . . he’s *listening* to me! That’s really nice.”

I loved dating Susan, not only because she was pretty but also because she did all the talking. I was too nervous to speak, but she would talk and talk, and I would just have to say, “Yah . . . uhuh . . . sure . . .” I’m not sure what she said, but it came out of that *beautiful body*.

You see, it was a symbiotic relationship . . . my admiration of Susan’s tight, white pants, and her desire to tell me everything. We didn’t realize it was the beginning of the greatest lesson we’d ever learn.

Whether you are single or married, whether you are male or female, if you are a Christian, God is teaching you the very same message . . . a lesson built into the nature of reality and you. In the beginning, God created man. “God created him in His own image, male and female he created them.” Together . . . His image. And He said, “I like it. It’s good.”

Man is born from woman, and woman is created from man out of his side. God brought them together in the covenant of marriage, a communion in which two persons become one flesh and in that communion bear fruit. They are *commanded* to bear fruit, but soon they steal fruit. They fall and cover their nakedness.

They cover the part where they are incomplete without the other; they cover the part that is like an internal organ exposed. *He* covers the part that is to penetrate the female with life; *she* covers the part that is to invite the seed of the male, which she is to receive in ecstasy as a gift of grace, in order that her body would nurture that seed and bear life.

They cover those parts where they are joined in communion . . . those parts they *long* to join but now are *ashamed* to join . . . those parts that not only join body but connect spirit and soul. And in the place of ecstasy, life, and joy, there is fear, shame, and pain. Instead of love that brings life, there is lust that brings death.

So they cover *those parts* from each other, and they hide *themselves* from the author of life.

In Ephesians, Paul tells us that God made us this way—male and female—to be joined together as one flesh; as a lesson, reference, or exhibit of Christ and His Church. He designed us this way *before* the Fall, as if He knew even then that He would need a way to tell us, while we were in exile, of His love and life *and* of our sin and His redemption.

More than love as a concept, He could say, “I *long* for you like a groom longs for his bride,” and “You are only complete in *me* and with me *in* you.” More than the words “salvation by grace through faith,” He could say, “You can only bear life—fruit, my Bride, when you surrender to my penetrating love and receive my joy in your place of shame.”

Sin hurts . . . not like some law that is broken, but like . . .

When you find your wife with another man . . .

When you long for your lover’s embrace and he’s in another room gratifying himself with

pornography, or she's whispering intimate secrets to another . . .

When you love someone *so much* yet you are so wounded by them you want to kill them in a rage precisely because you so desperately long to be loved by them. Finally, torn, you choose to die for them.

Like *that*.

Marriage is a covenant to picture the eternal covenant. Sex is a sacrament of that covenant, like communion is a sacrament of the new eternal covenant. "Sacrament" is a theologian's word to describe the "sign and seal of a covenant," a *physical* act that is far more than physical. It's spiritual. Sacrament is a covenant that bears fruit . . . *life*.

Little did we know in 1978 that God was beginning to teach us the deep things of His love. Little did we know God was sucking us in. He does that, you know.

At the start of John's gospel, Jesus turns water into wine at a marriage feast, and everybody wants to follow. Who wouldn't? Then in John 6, Jesus says, "You must drink my blood" (not *wine* but *blood*). By John 19, Jesus hangs naked on a cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. Almost everyone is gone, but John is there to watch as a Roman soldier plunges a spear into the side of Jesus—the second Adam. A river of blood flows out, and the Church is born—the Bride of Christ—the Second Eve.

In a kindergarten Sunday School class, the teacher was explaining how God formed Eve out of Adam's rib. Little Tommy was mesmerized by the lesson. Later in the week, his mother noticed him lying down holding his side. She asked, "Tommy, what's wrong?" He said, "I have a pain in my side. I think I'm going to have a wife."

I know it hurts, what Christ is showing you, but don't throw in the towel. There are no shortcuts that bypass Calvary.

REVELATION 2:18-25: *"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.*

"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden; only hold fast what you have, until I come.'"

Thyatira was the smallest and least consequential of all the seven cities to which the Revelation was written. It lay at the juncture of two valleys along a critical trade route. I think of

Thyatira like a truck stop. Do you remember, guys, that as a kid it was in truck stops on vacation where you first encountered porn and condom dispensers in the restrooms? There was something about being out on the road hidden . . . unseen.

Jesus has eyes like a flame of fire. He sees everything hidden. He knows Thyatira. It's the smallest town but gets the longest letter. Jesus intimately cares about the secret places and the private parts.

He commends the church but then says, "I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel." If you remember, Jezebel was the pagan queen of wicked King Ahab. She enticed Israel into the worship of Baal and Asherah. Baal was the Canaanite fertility god, and Asherah was his consort. The worship of Baal included feasting and ritual prostitution.

Evidently a woman in leadership in Thyatira was enticing folks into idolatry and "porneuo," translated "sexual immorality" or just "immorality." Thyatira was a Greek city with Greek gods.

In Corinth across the Aegean Sea, there was the great temple to Aphrodite (in Greek) or Venus (in Latin), the goddess of love. The temple contained 1000 cult prostitutes. In Thyatira, they would have had similar practices, even a mingling of Greek gods and Canaanite gods (Asherah and Venus).

We say, "How could they ever be enticed into such sins?" For a Greek, it wasn't such a stretch, because in health class at school they taught that sex was mostly just sperm, egg, and biology (you know . . . like we teach today).

"Nothing is more natural than sex." The same could be said about death.

So Paul writes to the church at Corinth saying: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? It is written, 'The two shall become one flesh,' but he who is united with the Lord becomes one spirit with Him. Shun *porneuo*. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you?"

You see the lie of Satan, don't you? "What you do with your body really doesn't matter." But then he uses your body as a door for demonic spirits and all the lies of Hell.

So ironically, in places like Thyatira and Corinth, they had cult prostitutes yet with the underlying belief that your body doesn't really matter (kind of like Vegas or Hollywood). It's no wonder it was in Corinth where they also abused the communion table, acting like it was only bread and wine. So Paul writes, "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body of Christ drinks judgment on himself."

On our communion table is food and *spirit*. It's a sacrament. My marriage bed is biology and *spirit*. It's a sacrament.

I'm not only one *body* with my wife, but if Paul is right, I commune with my Lord who resides within her: one *spirit* with Jesus. I had better discern *His* body or I defile *His* temple.

I am concerned that many of you may not even have a category in your mind for the ecstasy that God plans in marriage to a spouse or to Him. Either willingly or unwillingly your temple has been defiled without ever having been cleansed, so for you it's only biology, and that is the tragedy.

You not only cover your private parts from your marriage partner; you hide your naked heart from the lover of your soul, our Lord Jesus. So religion for you is not a communion of *joy*; it's fear and shame.

Jezebel is seducing believers in Thyatira to "porneuo." That means sex outside marriage; sacrament outside covenant. Porneuo is where we get our word "pornography." And "porne" in Greek is translated "harlot."

In Revelation 17, an angel takes John and shows him the Great Porne—Great Harlot. She's seduced the kings of the earth and the nations of the world. The merchants of the earth have "grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness." She is fallen, and she is the abode of demons.

John hears a voice issuing from heaven saying, "Come out of her, my people. Come out of her lest you take part in her sins."

The woman rides the Beast, which seems to be the entity or power behind the fallen governments and economies of this world. The woman is drunk with the blood of Christians, and she rides the Beast.

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, in 1996 alone we Americans spent more than eight billion dollars on hard-core pornography. America is the world's leading producer of porn. Today on-line porn revenues are estimated at two billion dollars a year. It's also estimated that twenty million Americans visit cyber-sex sites each month.

It's no wonder it's tough for you guys, because you're sinners living in a fallen world, and the Harlot rides the Beast. She knows your deepest hungers, and so does the Beast. Our economy is built on seducing you. It's not just what we call porno, it's an entire advertising industry.

Men, God made you to be the initiator in the image of Jesus. He *made* you to be aroused by the sight of your naked bride. The Dragon, the Beast, and the Harlot *know* it, so they lure you to other temples, especially when *your* temple is requiring sacrifice and grace.

But Jesus says that to worship at other temples, even in your own mind, is adultery. It opens the door to the Evil One, to his lies, to his demonic spirits, and to shame that deadens your heart and makes you unable to experience communion as God intended.

You long even more for communion, but you are unable to experience it. The hunger is stronger than ever, but you can't feel it, for your heart is encased and deadened by shame.

You go back for more and more and more and receive less and less and less, and the Great Harlot laughs and drinks your blood while you pay her to ride the Beast. You are defiling your temple, you're probably defiling a young woman's temple, *and* you're defiling your wife's temple. You're spitting on your heart and the heart of Jesus.

How can you expect your wife to receive your love when it's not her that you're loving in your mind? You say, "It's just another *body*." *No*. It's a temple. And it's at your wife's body alone – no matter how broken or bloodied, old, out of shape, or frigid; no matter how she emasculates you and rejects you – that you're to seek to worship the Living God with your sexuality.

Your seed—your "sperma," guys, belongs to her, not to a magazine.

Now, you may have noticed that I have been preaching to men. But I believe men and women are equally fallen. Men are fallen pursuers – corrupted masculinity. Women are fallen receivers – corrupted femininity.

Jesus says to Thyatira that Jezebel, a woman, beguiled and seduced his servants. We don't know exactly what that means, but apparently she teaches what Jesus calls the "deep things of Satan." Probably that means she teaches what she calls "deep truths" . . . truths that others just wouldn't understand . . . mystical, prophetic, intimate secrets . . . perhaps the idea that something is found in idolatry or fornication that the others aren't ready for or can't see . . .

Whatever the case, it's justification for keeping their communion of intimate secrets entirely in the dark.

The senior pastor at my last church had multiple affairs with upstanding church women. I didn't understand it. He was a middle-aged, slouching, balding guy. I saw what *he* got: naked bodies.

Now I see what *they* got: intimate secrets . . . a powerful man sharing intimate secrets.

He would say things like this: “Well, the rest of the church doesn’t really understand *grace* like we do.” The women said they were victims. I don’t buy it any more. Those intimate secrets belonged in the sacrament of their covenant in their bedroom at home.

There is only one person in the world from which I seek to never keep secrets: my bride.

I was talking to a friend this week who does a lot of Christian marriage counseling. He said, “It’s weird. When a man gives up on a marriage and throws in the towel, he turns to porn. When a *woman* gives up on a marriage and throws in the towel, she turns to *gossip*.”

Paul wrote, “If you can’t control your burning passions, get married.” I think he was talking mostly to guys. In I Timothy, he tells Timothy to refuse to “enroll young widows.” He says they will want to marry. Then he says, “Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.” That’s in the Bible.

It appears that Paul actually saw marriage as a cure for gossip in women in the same way he saw marriage as a cure for burning lust in men . . . kind of like God was saying this back in 1978 to two, immature, high school kids:

Hey, Peter and Susan. There’s a place for that burning passion, young man. There’s a place for that desire to tell someone everything, young woman. It’s marriage. I’m sucking you in, and you will learn the deep lessons of love, and it will hurt. So I’m binding you in a covenant. Don’t you go looking for fulfillment in any other naked bodies. Don’t go seeking communion by sharing intimate secrets with another.

You know, the Harlot rides the Beast for women as well as for men. It happens in a lot of ways, but isn’t the nation’s number one selling periodical the *National Inquirer*? We get upset about pornography at the check-out stand, but what about all those magazines that are devoted to nothing other than exposing the intimate secrets of other people’s covenants?

Remember this: Jezebel was part of the church. I have been surprised at women emotionally and sometimes physically communing with women, sharing all their intimate secrets with other Christian women, and then being *cold* and *frigid* to their husbands, saying, “He just *doesn’t get it*. There are deep, deep, wonderful truths of Jesus that I experience and know through this other woman.”

I think Jesus may call that “the deep things of Satan.”

One woman said to me, “My husband will just have to learn it from Jesus first.” Wrong! Don’t you *get* it? Jesus is in *you*, longing to teach him and draw it out of him. Women, make him masculine with your feminine. Men, make her feminine with your masculine. Help each other.

Husbands, share intimate secrets with your wife.

Wives, present your bodies to him as a gift.

I’m not saying that if you’re the perfect wife he’ll be a perfect husband. He may be *wretched*. And he may divorce you. Then Jesus says, “Now turn that passion toward me. No man could ever fulfill it. Turn it to me.”

I’m not saying if you’re the perfect husband she’ll be the perfect bride. She may be *wretched*.

She may emasculate you, degrade you, and refuse you. But then you may learn the *deepest* lesson of love: grace. You may then learn forgiveness as she nails you naked to a cross . . . *with Jesus*.

Grace, forgiveness, body broken, blood shed . . . these, my friend, are the deep things of God. He was crucified for all to see.

Robertson McQuilkin was the president of Columbia Bible College. Several years ago his wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. He resigned his post as president in order to take care of his failing wife.

He spends his time now changing Muriel's diapers, spoon-feeding Muriel her meals, and holding Muriel as she sleeps. She hardly has the youthful body of a goddess, but he still washes her naked body. She cannot speak to him intimate secrets any more, yet their touch *is* an intimate secret.

A young man asked Robertson one day, "Do you ever miss being president?" "No," he said. He enjoyed loving Muriel.

But that night he couldn't sleep. He prayed, "God, I like my assignment, but if a coach puts a man on the bench, he must not want him in the game. You don't have to tell me, but why don't you want me in the game?"

The next day on their walk around the block, a familiar, old drunk stopped them and slurred, "I like it. That's good . . . that's really good . . . I like it." Then he headed off down the street mumbling to himself over and over, "That's good . . . I like it."

They finished their walk and sat down. McQuilkin says he realized with a start, "God, it's you. It's you whispering to my spirit, 'I like it; it's good.'" Then he writes to God: "I may be on the bench, but if you like it and say it's good, that's all that counts."

Robertson McQuilkin may be hesitant to say it about himself, but *I* will say it: He's not *on* the bench; he's at the absolute center of the game with Jesus.

Women, every powerful man is becoming weak until he dies. Men, every beautiful woman is becoming less beautiful until she dies. Yet there is a deeper beauty and a deeper power and a deeper love.

Marriage is to be a picture of that deeper love, a lesson for all married *or* unmarried, in fulfillment or longing . . . a lesson for all to see. The lesson is this: Body broken and blood shed.

He has loved us at our absolute worst. Will you love Him at His absolute worst? Naked? Weak? Ugly? On a cross? His worst and yet His best. Can you see it? Nothing is more beautiful; nothing is more powerful.

At His communion table, He shares His body and reveals the deepest secrets. It's here you find the communion you most desperately desire. It's here you find the strength to be single or to be married to His glory. It's here you find complete forgiveness. His life is born out of your very place of greatest shame. *Grace*.

The sweet, wedding wine of Cana turns into the blood of the covenant on Calvary. But it turns back to wine again at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and this wine is better than the first.

He always saves the best for last.

Good Friday turns into Easter; Muriel will soon look like a goddess; *you* will receive a new body. Jesus says to Thyatira:

REVELATION 2:26-29: “*He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

My wife told me women tell secrets to get power. Well, men want sex to *feel* power. Pornography is evil, destructive power. Gossip is evil, destructive power. They both are equally capable of destroying a church.

“But to him who endures,” says Jesus, “I give power over nations.” What power? – “My power” (Psalm 2) . . . a *communion* of power. And He says, “I will give you the morning star.”

In Revelation 22, Jesus says, “I am the bright and morning star.” I don’t know exactly what to make of this, but to those Greeks in Thyatira, the morning star had yet *another* name: Venus.

Listen closely: Every desire created in you by God will be fulfilled in glory. Be patient and endure. *Right now* learn the deepest lesson: the love of God who hangs on a cross and gives birth to a new world, even through us, His Bride.

Further Reading

And as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jerobo'am the son of Nebat, he took for wife Jez'ebel the daughter of Ethba'al king of the Sido'nians, and went and served Ba'al, and worshiped him. He erected an altar for Ba'al in the house of Ba'al, which he built in Sama'ria. And Ahab made an Ashe'rah. Ahab did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him.

-I Kings 16:31-33

“How can you say, ‘I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Ba'als’? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done—a restive young camel interlacing her tracks, a wild ass used to the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind! Who can restrain her lust? None who seek her need weary themselves; in her month they will find her.”

-Jeremiah 2:23-24

“But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jez'ebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. . .”

-Revelation 2:20

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. “All things are lawful for me,” but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful for me,” but I will not be enslaved by anything. “Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food”—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, “The two shall become one flesh.” But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

-I Corinthians 6:9-20

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.

-I Corinthians 11:27

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show

you the judgment of the great harlot who is seated upon many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the dwellers on earth have become drunk.” And he carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast which was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations.” And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. . . . After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor. And he called out with a mighty voice, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird; for all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness.” Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues”

-Revelation 17:1-6a, 18:1-4

As a young boy of 12 or 13, I encountered outside the home . . . in the local grocery store and the local drug stores the soft-core pornography. As young boys do, we explored the backroads and side ways and by-ways of our neighborhood, and often times people would dump garbage and whatever they were cleaning out of the house. From time to time we'd come across pornographic books of a harder nature And it happened in stages, gradually. It doesn't necessarily, not to me at least, happen overnight. My experience with pornography that deals on a violent level with sexuality is that once you become addicted to it—and I look at this as a kind of addiction—I would keep looking for more potent, more explicit, more graphic kinds of materials. Until you reach the point where the pornography only goes so far. You reach that jumping-off point where you begin to wonder if maybe actually doing it will give you that which is beyond just reading about it or looking at it.

-Ted Bundy a few hours before his execution

To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

-I Corinthians 7:8-9

Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband; and she must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. But refuse to enrol younger widows; for when they grow wanton against Christ they desire to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us. For some have already strayed after Satan.

-I Timothy 5:9-15

He found that he could point to no single feature wherein the difference resided, yet it was impossible to ignore. One could try—Ransom has tried a hundred times—to put it into words. He has said that Malacandra was like rhythm and Perelandra like melody. He has said that Malacandra affected him like a quantitative, Perelandra like an accentual, metre. He thinks that the first held in his hand something like a spear, but the hands of the other were open, with the palms towards him. But I don't know that any of these attempts has helped me much. At all events what Ransom saw at that moment was the real meaning of gender. . . . Gender is a reality, and a more fundamental reality than sex. Sex is, in fact, merely the adaptation to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created beings. . . . Malacandra seemed to him to have the look of one standing armed, at the ramparts of his own remote archaic world, in ceaseless vigilance, his eyes ever roaming the earth-ward horizon whence his danger came long ago. "A sailor's look," Ransom once said to me; "you know . . . eyes that are impregnated with distance." But the eyes of Perelandra opened, as it were, inward, as if they were the curtained gateway to a world of waves and murmurings and wandering airs, of life that rocked in winds and splashed on mossy stones and descended as the dew and arose sunward in thin-spun delicacy of mist. On Mars the very forests are of stone; in Venus the lands swim. For now he thought of them no more as Malacandra and Perelandra. He called them by their Tellurian names. With deep wonder he thought to himself, "My eyes have seen mars and Venus" Our mythology is based on a solidier reality than we dream: but it is also at an almost infinite distance from that base. And when they told him this, Ransom at last understood why mythology was what it was—gleams of celestial strength and beauty falling on a jungle of filth and imbecility.

-C. S. Lewis, *Perelandra*

"And I will give him the morning star."

-Revelation 2:28

"I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star."

-Revelation 22:16

Waking the Dead

(Revelation 3:1-6)

REVELATION 3:1: "And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.'"

A dead church. Have you ever been to a dead church?

A couple of years ago Susan and I got to visit Westminster Abbey in London. We went to their Even Song Service . . . beautiful ceremony . . . impeccable music . . . magnificent words . . . and astounding boredom.

We sat in the chancel, for all to see, and three times my wife Susan fell asleep, hitting the wood with a loud thud that reverberated through the cathedral.

Have you ever been to an alive church? Growing? Changing? Vital? Awake?

When we lived in Danville, California, Susan never fell asleep in church, because Ron, the senior pastor, was a dynamic preacher. He had published several books, and he was in high demand nationwide. He had just written a book on mentoring, and I was his prime example . . . a Mini-Ron.

Ron had a name for being alive, authentic, and passionate. Oftentimes he would break down weeping in a sermon. People would say, "Wow! The Holy Spirit is moving!" Books, growth, riveting sermons . . . What a name and what a place! Yet at that church, the place that impacted me the most was out back, hidden, where few could see. It was the dumpster.

Our house was behind the church, so every day I would walk past the dumpster on my way to the Youth House. You can learn a lot about people by hanging around a dumpster. I found a lot of cool stuff in that dumpster. One of our high school interns found a \$20 bill and a perfectly good electric razor.

I read an article about scientists who studied trash to understand people.

The dumpster smelled, but it was where the action was: secret pastor meetings between services, grooms and groomsmen sneaking beer before the wedding . . . They found a baby by a dumpster this past week in Denver.

The dumpster is metaphorical in a way . . . smells like death but can teach a lot about life.

In the first week of September 1991, I ran into Ron by the dumpster. He used to sit back there in his car. He had been gone on Sabbatical for three months, and this was his first day back. He had called an emergency special meeting.

I had heard some rumors, so I went to his window and said, "Ron, what's up?" He said, "Peter, I'm glad I caught you before the meeting. I've decided to resign. I'm too stressed and too busy . . . I want time to speak and write."

Before I could catch myself, I said, "Oh good!" then quickly, trying to recover, "I mean, good that it's not something bad." He chuckled, and said, "Oh you mean like a divorce or something?" Looking me in the eye he said, "Oh no. Nothing like that."

He got out, and we walked together past the dumpster up to the meeting where he shared the same story.

A few days later, I was sitting in another meeting with members of the Presbytery who informed us that four women were suing Ron for having sexual liaisons with them at some other church years ago.

Shortly after that, we had another meeting with Ron. He wept and promised there were no other women. I journaled about how beautiful his repentance was.

A short time later, I was in another meeting and found out that the whole thing was a lie. There were several women in our church, right then, right there.

Then I found out the same thing had happened at Bel Air Presbyterian, the church where I had worked before Danville. Another pastor with an incredible name for being alive . . .

It wasn't too much later, while I was here at Lookout, that my old friend Tim, with a silver tongue and the name of being alive, wrote a note to his big, thriving congregation and his young family, went out to the garage, and asphyxiated himself. Dead.

I'm just saying I'm not so sure we're all that good at telling whether something is dead or alive.

Maybe we confuse alive with lots of noise, emotion, and zeal.

Maybe we confuse growth with something getting bigger.

Maybe we confuse a great name with life.

Maybe we are just not good at telling what's alive and what's dead.

So we look and see lots of excited people, noise, growth, and even miracles; mighty works and demons fleeing; and it all smells good. We say, "Man, look! That church is alive!"

But when we see just a few people weeping, their numbers shrinking, no miracles, some not even sure they believe – the place smells of demons. We say, "Man, that guy in the middle on the cross . . . He's dead . . . dead."

Maybe we don't know alive so well and dead so well.

"Sardis, you have the name of being alive, but you're dead." Other folks called them "alive." But sometimes just being named "alive" can kill you.

Ron told me later it was the pressure of ministry. Well, it wasn't the pressure of any ministry God gave him; it was the pressure of living up to a name. It had become an idol.

The letter to the seven churches has a chiasmic Hebrew construction. That means the last three letters mirror the first three. Sardis is parallel to Pergamum. Two weeks ago in Pergamum, we preached that even a good name can kill you.

Gary told me about a huge convention he attended years ago led by a famous pastor with a great name—you'd know it—pastoring a church with a tremendous name for being alive.

Of course, Gary was not in the main room, as you would expect, but running around in some hallway somewhere when he found a man lying on the floor, curled up in the fetal position, shaking and sobbing. Gary went up to him and asked, "Are you okay?"

The guy said, "I'm not making it!" Gary said something like, "That's okay. You don't have to make." The guy said, "You don't understand! It's not okay. My name is _____." It was a famous name from a famous church—the man speaking to all those pastors on "successful ministry."

I have a friend who comes from a very well thought of family in evangelical Christianity. But living up to his family name has been like a curse. He started out in professional ministry but would do things that made no sense . . . not really harmful to anyone; just embarrassing to himself.

I would try to help him; I would try to understand. "You have such incredible gifts, such a calling and love for Jesus and love for people, but then you go and do some stupid thing. I don't understand."

I was visiting this friend years ago in another state and went with him to one of his father's prayer support meetings. His dad is a great guy, but there is a whole Christian culture around him.

At this prayer meeting, we broke into "sharing groups." Everybody wore ironed blue jeans with sweaters over their shoulders tied in a knot in front, and they all said things like this: "Oh, bless you, brother. Bless you." "I have experienced victory this week." "Isn't God good?" "Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!"

And the whole time they smiled.

We said a little prayer, and we walked out. When the two of us were alone, my friend turned to me and said, "So, what did you think?" Now, I'm not saying this to be cute or vulgar; I'm saying it because I really meant it. (So please don't be offended.) I said, "To be honest with you, the entire time I had an irresistible urge to fart."

My friend stopped me, looked me in the eye, and said, "Well, now you know. Now you understand what it is to be me."

I have heard that pastors have affairs sometimes just to get out from under the pressure of a good name. I'm talking about pastors because I am one. But the same is true with business executives, government officials, teachers, salesmen, cops, actors, actresses, moms, dads . . . anybody who has a public life and wants to have a good public name.

You have built a name, and you're working to live up to the name. But inside you're dying, empty, tired, lonely, desperate . . . You want someone—anyone—to know you, but you think, "What if they really knew? What if the kids knew?"

You see, the Evil One is committing extortion, saying to you, "Pay, work, struggle, strive for your name, because what if they found out who you really are?"

So you strive for your name, but deep inside you long for the dumpster—the sewer—the bottle—the flesh—the porn—the gossip. "The power of sin is the law." Yet Satan's extortion is powerless without an addiction to a good public name.

Soren Kierkegaard wrote, "If someone in public happens to pass gas loudly, people are so startled, it is as if it

were the voice of a spirit. So intoxicated are we when we are in public."

Well, maybe it is a spirit. Maybe it is the Spirit—the Spirit of Truth saying, "Be honest. Let them know your gut. Expose what's dead and rotten. And the truth will set you free."

I know . . . that's gross. But have you ever seen a barn? It's like a dumpster. That's where the Christ-child chose to be born.

REVELATION 3:1-6: *"And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead. Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you. Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy. He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"*

[Shouting] "Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God." Jesus calls us to perfection! Are your works perfect? We represent the Author of life . . . love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

Do people look at you and say, "Wow! That's life!"? When was the last time you danced before the Lord in joy? When was the last time you led someone to the Living Christ? When was the last time someone stopped you on the street and said, "Why are you so happy? How can you be so alive?"

Look alive! . . . like Mother Teresa; like Billy Graham; like Ann Kiemel singing, "God loves you, and I love you, and that's the way it should be."

Do you want the white garments? Do you want your name in the Book of Life? Then look alive! Live! Live! Live! Or am I just screaming at dead things?

Now do you feel more alive? Or do you feel more dead, imprisoned to the name of being alive? A lot of yelling outside, but inside more death.

The more I scream "Live!" the more you are reminded of how dead you are. And the more you are reminded of how dead you are, the more self-conscious you get. And the more self-conscious you get, the more dead you get!

Jesus was very clear: "Lose your life and you'll find it." That means stop thinking about yourself. I said, Stop thinking about yourself! Are you thinking about yourself right now? The power of sin is the law. The law makes us dead. On top of that, we are not even very good at knowing what dead is! (Dead doesn't know dead.)

So if we're dead, screaming at us won't do any good. Have you ever screamed at a dead cat? "Get up!" It doesn't do any good. More than that, how does a dead thing conquer?

Each letter to the seven churches ends with this phrase: "To him who conquers I will give . . . I will do . . . such and such." So I read and wonder:

Will I conquer?

Will I revive that first love?

Will I be faithful unto death?

Will I renounce false teaching?

Will I tolerate that Jezebel woman?

Will I wake up and live?

Will God blot my name out of the Book of Life?

Will I conquer?

It could scare you to death! We know faith is exhibited in works. But this sounds like law . . . works righteousness. That's weird, considering this was written by John.

When we preached through the gospel of John a couple of years ago, time and time again I was struck by the fact that Jesus does everything! He calls people, He chooses people, He saves people, He sanctifies people, He lives His life through people.

But here in these letters . . . repent, endure, don't tolerate, get living!

Are we going to conquer? What is Jesus saying to us?

Technically, actually, He's not talking to us. We are overhearing Him communicate with someone else, the way John overheard Jesus talking to God the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Now John is writing down what Jesus is saying to someone else. Each letter is addressed to an angel and ends with this phrase: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the spirit says to the churches" (as if the angel is some kind of counselor or advocate).

Most of the pronouns in the letters are second person singular pronouns that get lost in translation. When Jesus says, "I have not found your works perfect," He is talking to the angel. That's really weird . . .

- 1. In Scripture, angels are good or bad, but this angel gets rebuked for bad things and commended for good. Bizarre. Not only that, but the rest of the New Testament teaches that we don't need some angel telling us stuff or representing us to God.*
- 2. Some have postulated the angel is a bishop or a prophet or some person in the local church, because "angelos" means "messenger." But bishop hardly fits the Biblical usage. And it puts a whole lot of pressure on these seven guys to save the churches.*
- 3. Neither "angel" nor "man" works, so some see it as just an unprecedented, bizarre, literary device. Yet Jesus seems to make a very big deal of these seven star messengers held tightly in His hand.*

Seven messengers, yet one. Seven is the number of God's manifold fullness. In chapter five, the lamb has seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

Seven spirits, yet we know that it is one Spirit—the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Jesus. The seven angels are the seven stars in Revelation 1:20. Then in our text we read, "The words of him [Jesus] who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

Some commentators say that the "and" is exegetical, meaning "namely" or "that is," and that the seven spirits of God are the seven stars, and the seven stars are the seven angels.

Are these seven spirits the very same seven spirits which are the seven eyes of the lamb, which is the Spirit of the Living God, which would mean Jesus is writing to His own Spirit resident in each individual church?

So of course He knows their works. And of course Jesus says to His spirit, "Let him with ears to hear, hear what the spirit says to the churches."

The Spirit is the Counselor. He is the Advocate.

Now, I may be entirely whacked on this thing, because I couldn't find any commentator who said such a thing. As I thought about it, I realized why. How could the Spirit be dead? How could the Spirit be accused of having tolerated Jezebel and having lost His first love? How could the Advocate—the "Paracletos"—be accused of sin?

Then I thought of the Apostle Paul who wrote, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." He must have been imputing them somewhere else . . . "For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, that we might be the righteousness of God." Some might say, "That's Paul; this is John."

In I John, John says, "If anyone does sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." John also calls the Holy Spirit "Advocate"—"Paracletos." It means "one who pleads another's case before a judge."

In the gospel of John, Jesus says, "I'm sending another advocate. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." Then He tells the disciples, "The advocate will teach you all things. He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak." (He gets direction.)

"And he will declare to you the things that are to come." That sounds familiar. "And he will take what is mine and declare it to you."

The letter goes to the churches. A church is all those indwelt by the Spirit of Jesus. They are the ones who will bear. So when Jesus says, "You're dead," could He be speaking to His own Spirit in those He chose to be alive? His Spirit can hear, "You are dead. Now live!"

Could it be that Jesus is so identified with His Bride—His own Body—His Beloved, even in her wretched garbage, that her sin is imputed to Him and His righteousness imputed to her?

So He takes his own rebuke for us and answers His own call in us. He not only saves us; He also sanctifies us — that is, He does good works in us.

So in these letters we hear our Lord speaking His directions to the Advocate—His Spirit—calling, "Live . . . live . . . live!" until "it is no longer I that lives but Christ who lives within me. And the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself up for me."

We are like a patient on an operating table overhearing the Great Physician talk to Himself about our surgery. If that is the case, what should we do? Hold still. Surrender, especially whatever is sick or rotten. Don't hide the gangrene.

Surrender, trust, hold still, and see the salvation of your God.

Conquering, then, depends on surrendering deadness and sickness to the Physician. "Will the Physician conquer? Will the Advocate conquer? Will Jesus conquer?" Well, that's what the rest of the book is about!

Revelation 17: "The Lamb shall conquer, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and they that are with him are called and chosen and faithful." So will He conquer? Absolutely! Will His name be blotted from the Book of Life (a name He shares with you)? No way!

The question then is, Am I with Him, surrendering all to Him? "For joined with him in a death like his I shall surely be joined with him in a resurrection like his."

The saints conquer by "the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony." That Word is Jesus. So even if I'm wrong about the "angel" thing, I'm right about how we conquer. For John wrote in I John 5:4, "This is the victory that conquers the world—our faith." Jesus said in John 15, "You can do nothing apart from me."

Overhearing the seven letters makes us call out, "Help! I can't conquer!" Then the Lamb conquers.

In verse three of the letter to Sardis, Jesus says, "Remember what you received and what you heard." Amazingly enough, we know what the Sardisians (or the Spirit even then enlightening them) received and heard. They heard Paul in Ephesus, a day's journey away. You can read about it in Acts 19. For two years Paul taught in the Hall of Tyrannus, and all the residents of Asia heard the Word of the Lord.

We know what Paul said in Ephesus and to Ephesus . . . things like this: "You be made alive when you were dead . . . for you have been saved by grace through faith, and this is not of yourselves lest any man should boast. No, not by works . . . for you are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that you would walk in them."

Later he says, "Anything exposed to the light becomes light. Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light."

The key is surrender, complete surrender, exposing things to the light. Sardis, stop trying to make a name for yourself. Sardis, stop trying to hide garbage. Sardis, surrender the garbage, "confess your sin one to another," and the Author of Life will be born in your stable.

He will give us His name; He will clothe us in white garments, which are the righteous deeds of the saints; He will get all the glory; for He conquers. By the way, when you get a good look at Him, you'll forget about yourself. And that is life.

Shortly after the Ron deal, I went for a walk with an old man one night. He was a pastor. His last ten years had been hard . . . a struggle with some difficult churches and difficult people. He hadn't published a book; his last

church was much smaller than Danville or Bel Air; he didn't have a big name.

Yet I'd have to say that it was in him more than in anyone else in my life, that I had seen love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. I don't mean he was perfect, but those things were real.

He took me for a walk, and we sat down by the dumpster on the steps out behind the church. He said, "Peter, I want you to know I haven't been very on fire for Jesus lately . . . not really alive like I should be [dead]. I want to recommit my life to Jesus [surrender], and I'd like you to pray for me."

Feeling pretty small and pretty dead myself, I did. I prayed for my dad with fumbling words, or I should say the Spirit in me called to the Spirit in him, "Live! Live! Live!" He did, and He does. For about forty years now the Spirit in Him has been calling to the Spirit in me, "Live! Live! Live!" Whatever good is in me is a product of the Spirit of Jesus mostly working through my dad, because he is so alive he freely admits being dead.

Sardis had a reputation for being alive, but they were dead. Jesus had a reputation for being dead, but He is life. Entrust everything to Him.

If there is a place of darkness in your life, and you have never surrendered it, Scripture says, "Confess your sins one to another that you may be healed." Satan commits extortion against God, but he also commits extortion against the Church, and you live in fear. "What if somebody found out about that?"

If a believer finds out because you confess it to them, this is what the believer is supposed to say (and when they say this, it's the Spirit of God in them calling out to the Spirit in you): "In the name of Jesus, you are forgiven. You are free. Now believe the white garment Jesus gives you. Believe the name He has for you, and sin no more."

You don't go dumpster-diving wearing a white garment. That's not who you are any more. So in the name of Jesus, surrender. Daily surrender. In the name of Jesus, live. Amen.

Further Reading

Plastic flowers never die.

-Anthony DeMello

I know your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead.

-Revelation 3:1b

Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent. . . . Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.”

-John 6:28-29, 47

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.

-John 10:27-28

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

-John 15:5

Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent.

-Revelation 3:3a

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God; but when some were stubborn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyran'nus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

-Acts 19:8-10

And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. . . . Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret; but when anything is exposed by the light it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light.

-Ephesians 2:1-2, 8-10 5:11-13

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches. . . . “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: “The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.”” . . . And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

-Revelation 1:20, 3:1, 5:6

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. . . . These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

-John 14:15-17, 25-26

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

-John 16:12-15

I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.

-I John 2:26-27

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. . . . For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

-II Corinthians 5:18-21

He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.

-Revelation 3:5

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.

-Revelation 12:11

And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations.

-Revelation 13:7

These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.

-Revelation 17:14

These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

-John 16:33

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

-Colossians 3:2-4

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

-Galatians 2:20

Waking to Faith

(Revelation 3:7-13)

The following was recorded by Sister Mary Rose McGeedy:

"I'm waiting for my dad. Have . . . have any of you seen my dad?"

The tall and skinny scarecrow-kid shifted before us on the streetcorner, fear racing across his face, dirt smeared all over his body.

His speech was slowed and slurred. His eyes dull and empty. At first I thought "drugs," but then I realized it was something else . . . the boy was mentally disabled.

He was . . . a little boy . . . in a 16-year-old's body.

"I'm sorry, son, but I don't know your dad . . . What's your name?"

"Eric"

"Hi, Eric. What do you mean you're waiting for your dad?"

"He's coming back. I hope. . . ."

Eric clinched his hands tightly into a fist, and began to rock back and forth . . .

"Maybe we can help you. Where do you live, Eric?"

"I don't know."

"Do you live in New York City?"

"I don't know."

"Do you live in a city, with lots of streets and buildings?"

"Yeah. Lots of cars."

"When did your dad say he would be back?"

"He just took me for a walk, and then said, 'Wait here, I'll be right back.' That was right after he gave me breakfast. But he must be coming back . . . right?"

"How long have you been here, Eric?"

"I don't know, but I've been here for awhile."

"Have you slept here?"

"Yeah. I sleep in my pipe. I wish I had my blanket, though, 'cause . . . it gets really cold."

"Your pipe? Where is that, Eric?"

Eric pointed to the bridge that runs along the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, and then led us to his "home." Sure enough, hidden in the dirt and squalor of a dark corner sat a large, old pipe.

"Is this where you sleep, Eric?" He nodded . . . "Eric, how many times have you slept in the pipe? One time? Two times? Or more?"

"Yeah. I sleep here a lot."

"Eric, what's your last name?"

"Eric."

"No, your other name. Do you have another name? Like, I'm Mary Rose, but my last name is McGeedy. Do you have another name?"

"Just Eric."

His name was Just Eric. You wonder how many people there are in this world like Just Eric . . . people with little power, who find a closed door at every turn . . . people who feel shut out while the world passes them by . . . people who have a confused but belligerent hope that "he's coming back. Somebody is coming back for me, because I belong somewhere else."

Whether we like it or not, to other street kids and most of the world, Just Eric is rather ordinary.

In Africa, there are hundreds of millions of orphans due to AIDS. Throughout the world, hundreds of millions are desperately hungry. Hundreds of millions would be thankful for a good cement pipe. Hundreds of millions . . . and their struggle is not extraordinary.

American POW's, the families of victims of the Oklahoma bombing, Columbine High School . . . now that is extraordinary: huge publicity and incredible stories of courage . . . like the recent story of the Andrea Gail, in the movie The Perfect Storm – tragic, but it's a glorious picture of man pitted against the raging sea.

In Scripture, the sea is the abode of demons and the Dragon, as well as an instrument of God's judgment. The Andrea Gail's heroic struggle against the perfect storm at sea is glorious. But what about all those simply lost at sea? What about all the Just Erics whose stories are never heard?

Maybe you feel like Just Eric. In a metaphorical kind of way, you feel like you have little power. Doors are always shutting in your face. It feels like the world is passing you by. You are a Christian and you profess, "Jesus is coming back," but in your honest moments you have your doubts.

So you serve on a church committee, you help out on a church mission, but you wonder, "Do I really matter? Do I count? I feel like I have such little power yet no great stories about heroic suffering either."

For most of your life, it has felt like you are treading water . . . entirely ordinary . . . maybe less than ordinary . . . maybe not Eric, but to some degree we all feel like Just Eric.

REVELATION 3:7-11: "To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write . . ."

Last week I preached that my strong suspicion is that that angel is the Holy Spirit in communion with His church, communicating to His church and living out the call of Christ within the church.

"These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

"I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth. I am coming soon; hold on"

A great storm is coming (the perfect storm) to test those who live upon the earth. But Jesus is going to keep the Philadelphians from the storm. Some say that storm is strictly a seven-year period sometime after the year 2001. So Jesus is saying, "Guys, cheer up! You won't be around for the seven years of tribulation two thousand years from now! Hang on; I'm coming soon . . . actually, sometime after 2008. Of course you'll be dead, but if you were alive, I'd rapture you and take you out of this world!"

Is that what He is saying? I don't think so. I think He is saying, "Persecution will intensify in your lifetime, and I will keep you."

In John 17, Jesus prays this to His Father: "I have given them your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that you should take them out of the world but that you should keep them from the evil one."

Maybe the storm will intensify right before Jesus comes back. But if we would step out of our rich, powerful, American mindset for a little while and take a good look at this world, I think we would see that for most Christians in most of the world, things are pretty stormy and have been stormy for quite some time.

I think that we might also see something else: Jesus still walks in storms on the raging sea. Behold, He is still coming soon.

Philadelphia lay twenty-three miles southeast of Sardis and was an area plagued with earthquakes. It was a rather young city established as an outpost of Greek culture, a frontier town, kind of like Denver.

Jesus says, "You have little strength"—power . . . the Greek word is "dunamis," where we get our word "dynamite" . . . not a lot of fireworks in Philadelphia . . . ordinary or less than ordinary. But Jesus says, "You are faithful, so I will keep you from the storm."

Over in Smyrna they are also faithful, they get thrown into prison, and some get martyred. It was in Smyrna we met Polycarp. Incredible suffering; incredible heroes of faith.

But here in Philadelphia — "Keep treading water."

Suffering used to make me doubt God's love for me. Now, having spent a good chunk of time in scripture, my lack of suffering at times makes me doubt God's love. What I mean is, I wonder things like: "God, could you be pleased with an ordinary guy who just goes through ordinary kinds of suffering and still feels he's barely hanging on at times?"

It appears the Philadelphians were going through ordinary kinds of suffering. Folks from the synagogue (to which many undoubtedly belonged) were ridiculing them saying, "God doesn't love you. You're no longer part of the people of God!" Rejected, ridiculed, and excluded by old family and friends, and through them the Evil One whispered, "Unloved . . . unworthy . . . rejected."

Ordinary church, ordinary bride. I imagine she was feeling kind of frumpy . . . housecoat, slippers . . . one more day of doing the laundry . . . and does it matter?

And Jesus says, "Yes. I know. But look! I place before you an open door."

He also says He has the key of David. Isaiah 22:22 refers to the key of the house of David and the one who wields it open. "He shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." It's the key to a kingdom!

This key in Revelation 3 is not just to the house of David; it is the key of David. I think that's interesting, for David had little power. He was ordinary. He was a shepherd boy smaller than all his brothers, yet God called him.

As a weak boy David had incredible power. He conquered Goliath and spread the kingdom of Israel. He conquered evil spirits in Saul and sent them running with his music. He eventually became king, no longer small but immense . . . Israel's greatest king. Ironically, it was then that he seemed most weak . . . when he saw himself as king. When he saw himself as strong, he sank.

Adultery, murder, betrayal by his own children . . . when he was weak, everywhere he turned there were open doors.

Jesus says, "I place before you, Philadelphia, an open door." People debate what that open door is. Many say it's the door of evangelism. In both Corinthian letters, Paul refers to open doors of spreading the Gospel. It was Paul who wrote, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God."

That is, "Philadelphia, it's your very weakness that allows you to show forth the kingdom to those who haven't heard." That makes some sense, especially to rich Americans like us living in a commercial society where everybody is trying to sell us something. We are highly suspicious of commercials. They almost always lie.

Powerful people can afford to live their lives like commercials, always striking a pose, wearing the right clothes, saying the right things — every word carefully scripted. So we have learned it is what comes out in the unguarded moments of life that is most convincing. It's there we find truth.

A little boy watched a minister as he did some carpentry out in his yard. He wouldn't leave but watched intently. Pleased with the thought of being admired, the minister said, "Son, are you looking for some pointers in carpentry?" The little boy said, "No. I'm waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a

hammer.” That was a smart kid.

Jesus was a carpenter for thirty years in a little, frontier town called Nazareth. He never wrote a book, never held an office, never earned any credentials, and never traveled more than 200 miles from his place of birth.

Sure, there were miracles, but he hid them from people — no dynamite unless they had faith first.

So to the world it looked like a pretty ordinary life. But He said to a few folks, “Come walk with me a while.” They watched Him do ordinary things in an extraordinary way . . . hold children, talk to a woman by a well, sleep on a boat in a storm.

He died between two ordinary thieves, crucified like hundreds of thousands of others in Rome. And yet in the words of Phillips Brooks: “I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.”

His ordinary life exposed extraordinary faith, hope, and love in a way that our powerful, scripted, and together lives do not.

He chose weakness to expose the glory of God, and on the cross He exposes the heart of God. It’s there He “draws all men to himself” (John 12:32).

By far and away most (if not all) people come to Christ because they saw Him in some ordinary person at some unscripted moment. Sure — they may come forward at the Billy Graham Crusade, but it is because they saw faith, hope, and love in people like you—their neighbor.

Live your ordinary life in faith, and you wield supreme power.

I have a friend who was raised in a coven. Her story is the most extraordinary I’ve ever heard. And the power of God in her and for her is the most extraordinary I have ever seen.

Because of Jesus in and through her, it is not hard for me to believe in an Ancient Dragon rising from the sea and a Harlot drunk with the blood of saints and riding a Beast. Most of all, it is not hard for me to believe there is a Lamb that was slain, who conquers them all. Absolutely extraordinary.

But she came to Christ because Christ came to her in just an ordinary friend who said one day, “Would you like to come to church with me?” She went because this ordinary gal just “seemed nice.”

This ordinary friend still has no idea of the incredible power she unleashed; no idea that she walked on water into the heart of a raging storm. Maybe that’s the power of it: not knowing, unscripted, uncalculated faith — faith shining through the cracks in an ordinary clay pot.

At the Judgment, the sheep say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, sick and in prison?” That is, “Jesus, we don’t remember you there . . . it was just an ordinary day . . . I was just helping out at the nursing home . . . that was You?”

When Peter walked on the water in that raging storm, I don’t think he knew what he was doing. In other words, he wasn’t sitting in the boat psyching himself up for great and mighty works! He just loved Jesus and believed Jesus. Jesus said “Come,” and he did. It was when he noticed how extraordinary his situation was, and how extraordinary he was, that he sank.

Maybe you don’t know when you’re walking on water. Maybe there is something good about that. The moment you notice, it becomes about you, and you sink. The people watching you then sink, because they think it’s about you too.

“Philadelphia, you have little power. But before you I have placed an open door.”

Maybe the open door is the door of people’s hearts won to Christ. In the next paragraph, Jesus says this: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”

Maybe it’s evangelism — the door to people’s hearts. But maybe it’s much bigger than that, because in chapter four John writes, “After this I looked, and WOW! [that’s the Greek] a door was opened in Heaven.”

Little David had power over demons and power over giants, and little David had a key to the kingdom of Israel, but he also had a key to something much bigger than that: the heart of God. That’s why God chose him (I

Samuel 16). He looked on his heart. Faith, hope, and love in weakness; a man after God's own heart.

This is hard for us Americans to believe, but maybe God isn't in short supply of dynamite, miracles, and power. Maybe He would die for a little faith, hope, and love from His children.

In October of 1991, two weather fronts over New England combined with the remains of a hurricane coming up the eastern seaboard. Together they formed what we've called the Perfect Storm. To the north the Andrea Gail battled with all her expertise, power, and might; to the south a six-year-old little girl practiced her ordinary backstroke. Gary told us about her a couple years ago. Her story captured my heart, and Gary said I could share it again.

John was a young father in Gary's congregation in Wayne, Pennsylvania. One day in late October of 1991, he took his six-year-old daughter Mary sailing off the Jersey shore. He had not checked the weather report.

Six miles out John was shocked at how fast the winds changed, and how quickly a storm came up. It was the storm of the century. Soon the boat capsized, and they were in the water. The life preservers were still tied to the boat while the boat was being swept out to sea.

Holding Mary, John realized there was no way he could swim the six miles back to shore. He would have to swim alone. Finally he said to Mary, "Mary, you can float on your back as long as you want." They had practiced in the pool back at home. "Float on your back, Mary. I'll swim to shore, and I will be back for you."

Three hours later the Coast Guard found John. Together they looked for Mary for an hour and a half, in twenty- to thirty-foot swells in the midst of that storm.

It was almost dark, and they were using the spotlight when miraculously they found Mary. She had been floating for five hours. When the guardsmen pulled her on board they asked, "Mary, how did you do that?" She said, "Well, my daddy said I could float on my back as long as I wanted to and that he would come back for me. My daddy always does what he says."

The Andrea Gail fought with courage and power, and she sank. There is glory in that. Mary just practiced her back float, and she didn't even know she beat the storm of the century. She just believed what her daddy said: "Keep floating, Mary. You can float as long as you want, and I'll be back."

You could say faith in her daddy kept her from the great storm which came down on the whole east coast.

"I know you're small and weak, Philadelphia, but keep on keeping my word. Hold on, Philadelphia, and I will be back. I'll keep you from the hour of trial. I'm coming soon."

And Jesus said to His struggling disciples, "Where I am going you cannot follow." He was swimming into the heart of the perfect storm—Hell itself. But He said to them, "I will be back, and my Spirit will keep you. Patiently endure in faith."

Maybe you are walking on water, and you don't even know it. You're just hanging on one more day. Angels watch in wonder from the deck of the boat. They say, "Look! She's floating in the storm of the century!" Maybe you are walking on water.

But that's not my main point. My point is this: Faith like Mary's—faith in weakness—ravishes the Father's heart. Mary had the key to her father's heart, so she also had the key to the United States Coast Guard.

What father could not resist faith, hope, and love like Mary's? Certainly not God the Father, so it is Mary who has a key to the Father's heart; David who has the key to God's heart; Jesus the Christ (the perfect child) who trusted His Father from the pit of Hell, and He bore the perfect storm of God's judgment in faith.

Now what is Christ's is declared to Philadelphia, and the Spirit says, "Look! — a door."

In chapter four verse one, we begin to look through that door, and what do we see? We see the throne of God, and on the throne is someone we know — a Lamb! . . . weak and powerless, slain for us . . . bleeding.

John tells us Jesus is "from the bosom of the Father"—the heart of God. And we see He is worthy to open the scroll and "to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing . . . for ever and ever."

For He, the root of David, has conquered! He has even conquered our dead hearts with His own blood. He has the key to our hearts. He opens the scroll, and history happens: four riders, storms, conquest, warfare, famine,

death; then martyrs, signs and wonders, the consummation of this creation.

But right before He opens the scroll and gives meaning to all history, a scent rises from the throne: incense. It's the prayers of His saints. They ascend to the heart of God, like Mary muttering, "He said He would be back."

Prayers of the saints; not building projects, crusades, mighty works, wonderful mission programs, sermons. Prayers, rising from prisons, hospital beds, lonely apartments, boring church services, frumpy wives in housecoats, scared little kids, a lonely boy like Eric in Brooklyn.

You see, there is an open door between the boring little frontier town of Philadelphia and the heart of God Almighty. So there is nothing more powerful in all created reality, including kings, famines, earthquakes, dragons, or storms.

There is nothing more powerful than the frumpy little church in Philadelphia. They are given the key to the Creator's heart as they do their back float in the midst of the raging storm. What father could resist faith, hope, and love like that? — like David's . . . like Mary's . . . like Eric's, the kid in the Bronx?

When I told you about Eric, you stopped thinking about yourself. Eric's faith, hope, and love opened your heart. That's the power of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In Jesus, God opened the door to your heart. Jesus in you has opened the door to God's heart. Jesus through you opens the door to other people's hearts. Faith, hope, and love, displayed in weakness, and Jesus does it! To Him be all glory, honor, and praise for evermore! Amen.

Eric's earthly father didn't come back. He was an evil father. Yours may be evil. But God the Father is not. I believe He came to Eric in the form of Sister Mary Rose McGeady. And He is the One who created in Eric the longing—faith, hope, and love.

I imagine Eric is not Just Eric, but that his surname is God, and he has a new name: Jesus. His home is not the Bronx but the New Jerusalem. I believe God will move all creation for Just Eric. And He will engineer a storm for Just Mary. And the meek will inherit the earth.

Bride of Christ, no matter how frumpy, ordinary, and dull you may feel, your faith exists in the great storm of a fallen world. Your faith is the power which ravishes the heart of God Almighty. Keep going.

REVELATION 3:11-13: "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Picture Mary out on the sea with no boats around. It's getting dark; she's doing the back float. And she's singing, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so"

My friend, that's you. And the angels in glory look down in awe and say, "That's the new song! That's the song of faith being sung from the depths of the dark planet." It's the song that ravishes the heart of the Father.

I picture my son Coleman out on that sea, and I think, "Oh, I would have to die for him . . . I couldn't stand it." That's it. Those are the nails that held the Son of God against that wooden cross. They aren't made of iron; they are made of His love for you.

My wife Susan read somewhere about a little girl buried in an earthquake. They searched for her for days until they picked up a sound. It was that song: "Jesus Loves Me." When they dug her out, she said, "My mommy always said if I'm afraid I should just sing that song and God would hear me."

Even if she died, she'd live. The Father can't resist that song sung in faith. It's incense rising in the bleeding heart of the Living God.

Further Reading

“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. . . .”

-Revelation 3:7-8

So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers; but the sheep did not heed them. I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. . . .”

-John 10:7-9

After this I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, “Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

-Revelation 4:1

Because eternity was closeted in time, he is my open door to forever.

-Luci Shaw

And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

-Isaiah 22:22

When they came, he looked on Eli'ab and thought, “Surely the LORD'S anointed is before him.” But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

-I Samuel 16:6-7

Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

-Isaiah 53:1-3

“Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?”

-Matthew 13:55

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in

another obscure village. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never set foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He had no credentials but himself. . . . While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. His executioners gambled for the only piece of property he had on earth while he was dying—and that was his coat. When he was dead, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. . . . I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever were built, and all the parliaments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as that one solitary life.

-Phillips Brooks

And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; and they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.” . . . saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, “To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!”

-Revelation 5:7-10, 12-13

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

-I Corinthians 1:26-29

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior . . .

- I Timothy 2:1-3

But we exhort you, brethren, to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody.

-I Thessalonians 4:10b-12

Faith wears everyday clothes and proves herself in life's ordinary situations.

-Bertha Munro

Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things . . . as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value.

-Teilhard de Chardin

We should make a decision to do little things with great love. When Therese of Lisieux—the Little Flower—died and was about to be canonized, everyone was asking, “What reason is there for the Holy Father to canonize her? She hasn't done anything extraordinary.” The Holy Father pointed out in writing the reason for his decision: “I want to canonize her because she did ordinary things with extraordinary love.”

-Mother Theresa

Someone once said that the spiritual significance of something is in inverse proportion to the publicity surrounding it. A publicized event, like a parade, is more spectacular than it is significant. And that is true even if the parade is a religious one.

-Ken Gire

To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others . . . to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom - I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table – “Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.” But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, “Get lost.” Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.

-Fred Craddock

I have given them thy word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one.

-John 17:14-15

Waking From the Evil Enchantment (Revelation 3:14-22)

This week Time magazine came proclaiming good news on its cover, how science is offering new hope for treating all our fears. The cover page in big, bold letters is the Bible phrase: FEAR NOT.

In the margins of the article, they list hundreds of phobias now known to science, phobias like alektorophobia — fear of chickens; arachibutyrophobia — fear of peanut butter sticking to the roof of the mouth; homilophobia — fear of sermons; ophidiophobia — fear of snakes. I quote:

For Martin, 21, a dental student in London, Ontario, his fear of snakes is so overwhelming that he stapled together pages in a textbook to avoid flipping to a photo of a snake. . . . “It’s odd,” he says, “because I’m not in situations where I would ever see snakes.” His brain, however—or at least the oldest parts of it—may have been.

The article goes on to talk about how all these fears may have been helpful at one point in our ancient past, but not now, of course. They’re silly. We live in the United States of America! This is a nice place.

So scientists have therapies to help us see it’s “just a snake,” and powerful medication to squelch all these irrational fears. Here are some more from the same list:

satanophobia — fear of Satan

peccatophobia — fear of sinning

hadephobia — fear of Hell

theosophobia — fear of God

staurophobia — fear of Jesus hanging on a cross

thanatophobia — fear of death.

But they can medicate these fears away.

How about this one? — emetophobia — fear of vomiting.

REVELATION 3:14-17: “And to the angel of the church of Laodicea write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.’”

Ouch . . . Poor? But Laodicea was a center of commercial prosperity! Blind? They manufactured a world famous eye salve! Naked? They were known for the black woolen textiles!

They were so prosperous that when a devastating earthquake struck the region in 60 A.D., they refused to accept financial assistance from the Empire saying, “We have prospered and need nothing.”

The only thing anyone could really complain about in Laodicea was the water supply. Nearby Colosse was known for cold, pure drinking water. Hieropolos six miles to the north was known for hot, therapeutic mineral springs.

Because Laodicea had no water supply of its own, an aqueduct was built from Hieropolos to Laodicea. But by the time the water got to Laodicea, it had become lukewarm and distasteful.

Each of the seven letters fits each of the ancient cities remarkably well. They aren’t just metaphors for the

Church thousands of years later. So the Revelation has to be relevant to them as well as to us.

Just as the town viewed themselves, so did the church: spiritually rich. The Laodiceans knew the Apostle Paul! And the famous Epaphras was a hometown boy! Their faith was organized, categorized, certified, franchised, and homogenized.

But Jesus says, "You are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." Wow! Laodicea kind of reminds me of the United States of America.

I was thinking about these phobias . . . thanatophobia, for instance — fear of death. Pretty much everybody dies. Yet we call thanatophobia a form of insanity.

Maybe the thanatobes are most sane. Maybe the people crouching under beds and hiding in closets are most in touch with reality. Maybe we really will die one day. Maybe great tribulations are always at hand. Maybe there is a God, and He is mad (zeusophobia).

Maybe there really is sin (pecatophobia), Satan (satanophobia), and a Hell (hadeophobia). Maybe ophidiophobia — fear of snakes — is about more than just reptiles in our ancient past but one Hell of a Snake in our ancient past and present reality.

Maybe the insane are the most sane.

The only way we can really function well as this productive American society is to pretend that our fears are irrational phobias. If we didn't deny our fears, deny death, and deny our consciences, we would be paralyzed with fear, hiding in closets, and crouching under beds, ice cold with terror.

Worse yet, we would all freak out and become fiery hot, religious zealots who don't care about the economy, Volvos, or the stock market. Fear could totally screw up this incredible economy of conspicuous consumption!

So if I were in control of the economy, wanted to control all the people in the economy, and was evil (working for some Ancient Snake, for instance), I would try to get people to ignore their greatest fears and dreams. Even better, I'd attach my merchandise to their greatest fears and dreams. That way I could sell my merchandise and, better yet, keep them enslaved in bondage to me.

I would come up with slogans like this: Volvo — It can save your soul; Diamonds last forever; Levi — because you are what you wear. So then they would live with this vague dissatisfaction, a confused hope, and an unexamined fear . . . this idea that something's wrong.

"But I bet that next year's Volvo will do the trick!"

"If I only had a diamond, I would be set!"

"If I had a pair of Levis, I would be somebody."

Addicted, intoxicated, blinded . . . It would work like magic.

Well, that's just a crazy thought. But when was the last time you saw a commercial that said something like this? —

"We have Volvos, diamonds, and jeans to sell, but we had a meeting and realized: We're all going to die! We don't know how to save your soul or why we even exist! So we were thinking . . . cars, rocks, and pants don't seem like much of a priority.

Of course, we wouldn't see a commercial like that . . . because it's the truth. We do a good job with our illusions here in America. We can afford to.

We even dress up dead people so they look nice. We spend thousands of dollars on embalming, nice suits, and beautiful caskets, so that dead people look alive. Maybe we ought to do it like they did in Romania when I was there.

They put the corpse on a table in the yard. There were dogs, flies, and weeping children; people were gathered

around looking at this dead body on the table. Then they turned to me and said, "Pastor, do you have something to say?" I turned to my friend and said, "He does."

Gary told me about a very nice funeral he did in Cherry Creek. They had gone out to the graveside . . . Gary in his robes . . . beautiful liturgy . . . the deceased in an expensive casket . . .

At the start of the ceremony, Gary somehow slipped and fell into the grave! And he couldn't get out. They had to come and pull him out of the grave. Everybody kind of woke up. It broke the spell for a moment.

Maybe the pastor ought to always fall in the grave — the new liturgy.

Zig Zigler tells about a guy who worked the late shift and always took a shortcut when he went home at midnight. He always walked the same route through a cemetery. One night he didn't realize that during the day they had dug a fresh grave. And he fell in! He worked like crazy to get out, but he just couldn't. So he sat in the corner and decided to wait until morning when someone could help him out.

He was half asleep when a drunk stumbled along and also fell into the grave. This intoxicated, old drunk was trying to get out, so he touched the drunk on the leg and said, "Friend, you can't get out of here." But he did. (Maybe he even stopped drinking and woke up.)

Just as the town of Laodicea rubbed off on the church in Laodicea, maybe the United States of America is rubbing off on us. So we tend to think we've got it all under control. We're rich, we've obtained prosperity, and we need nothing . . . nice church.

And if we do need something, we know exactly what to do: ask the pastor, get a counselor, go down to the Christian bookstore, go to a seminar, take a class on "how to live the victorious Christian life" . . . "how to conquer this or that." We have it all worked out like a science — even the Revelation.

So we have Very Nice Churches and Very Nice People. "Don't worry, Jesus. We've got it all figured out. We don't need any help. We've got you covered."

When I think I have my wife all figured out, I'm in trouble. When I think I know exactly what I need to do to make this marriage thing work very nicely, I'm in trouble. You know couples like that—very nice couples. Their marriage is so nice . . . they never fight . . . then one day they just split up. Why? They don't need each other; they don't care about each other.

The thing I fear most in my wife is when she gets lukewarm . . . when she gives up the fight and settles for the status quo . . . a nice marriage. She smiles and acts nice, but I can't get her to look at me.

If she's screaming at me, furious with me, she's looking at me. If she's hot with passion for me, she's looking at me. But lukewarm . . . she won't look at me. It's worse than hatred. Unconsciously she's trying to convince herself I don't matter and she doesn't need me. Invariably I have to pick a fight and press the issue until she cracks. We each lose control, fight, then heal.

Apathy is blindness.

"Would that you were cold or hot," says Jesus. "At least then you would look at me. Looking at me, abiding in me, is life. But lukewarm — you make me want to barf [that's Greek]."

A few months ago, a member of our church mailed me a vision. For weeks she kept seeing Jesus sitting on His throne, His robe glowing with incredible light. Then she would see Him enormous, standing on the earth in a field ripe for harvest, His eyes flaming as He looked to His Father in Heaven.

In the vision, she hears: "Jesus is pouring his glory upon the earth, and He is asking Lookout Mountain Community Church to join Him." She asks, "Where is Lookout Mountain Community Church?" Then she sees the backs of this congregation. Some enter the glory of His robe; others stand like statues. Why won't they enter? On November 25, she saw this in worship:

Jesus is standing in the middle of the harvest field. This time he draws me to his side, turns me around and shows me the faces of those who remain behind. I am shocked as I stammer, "They are blind!" They have no sight! They have no eyeballs at all. Their eyeballs have been gouged out. Where

eyes once existed are only caverns, holes of darkness! On the verge of nausea, I cry out, "Lord, will they ever be able to see? Lord, give them sight!" I hear, "Those with eyes will see!"

Now, that could be bad pizza, hormonal imbalance, or runaway flesh. But I know this person and trust this person. Not only that, but I basically read the same thing in scripture. So I imagine it's true.

But this is the frustrating part: I can't make blind people see! No book can do that, no counselor can do that, no program can do that, no seminar can do that.

Worse than that, the blind Laodiceans don't even know they're blind. I may not even know where I'm blind. The blind leading the blind. In fact, I take it on faith that we're all at least a bit blind, for we are all at least a bit lukewarm. And nobody can truly see Jesus in His glory and just stay lukewarm.

So we're all at least a bit blind, a bit asleep, and a bit intoxicated; maybe that's because we kind of want to be. Sometimes lukewarm is pretty comfortable. Sometimes it's nice to be in the dark. Enchanting. But then we become blind to even being blind. What do we do?

All week I kept thinking about a scene in the Chronicles of Narnia. Maybe you remember The Silver Chair. At one point the children and their friend Puddleglum (who is a Marshwiggle) find themselves in the dark underground kingdom of the evil witch, who is really the Great Serpent.

When the witch finds them, she doesn't assault them, as they expect; she enchants them. She appears lovely, she talks sweetly, she sings melodiously. Then Lewis writes, "They were being enchanted, and of course the more enchanted you get the more certain you feel that you are not enchanted at all."

They tell the witch of the real world—the Overworld, the sun, and Aslan the Lion. She coos, "Oh silly. You made up the idea of a sun from the idea of one of my lamps. You made up this idea of Aslan, the Great Lion, from one of our housecats."

So the children mumble, "I suppose the other world must be a dream."

"Yes, it's a dream," coos the witch.

Their hopes are a dream; their fears are obviously a dream, because this woman is lovely. She is making them comfortable . . . fire, music, food, wine, sweet smells . . . maybe Volvos, diamonds, and jeans. Intoxicating.

She says: "There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan. And now, to bed all. And let us begin a wiser life tomorrow. But first, to bed; to sleep; deep sleep, soft pillow, sleep without foolish dreams."

And Jesus says: "You're lukewarm. You think you're rich and prosperous, but you're wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

How could that be? In Revelation 18, we see how it could be. According to scripture, a Great Harlot rides the Beast under the authority of the Great Serpent; the economies of the governments of this world are under the dominion of Satan.

In chapter eighteen verse three, we read: "All the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries." In verse twenty-three: "By her magic spell all the nations were led astray."

Even the Church is intoxicated, lukewarm, and dead. So what are we to do?

[Singing] "Get all excited and tell everybody that Jesus Christ is Lord . . ." Get all excited and . . . get worked up and print more T-shirts. Do you remember that song we used to sing? It doesn't work.

This is what Puddleglum did, just as the enchantment was almost complete. Lewis writes that Puddleglum did a very brave thing. In a daze, he walked to the fire and plunged his bare foot into the coals. He knew it would hurt, and it did, but immediately he knew exactly what he thought. "There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic."

The enchantment is broken for all, at the smell of burnt Marshwiggle feet. Their eyes are opened, and the witch becomes a serpent. They escape to Narnia and to Aslan, the Great Lion.

And Jesus says this: "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

REVELATION 3:18-22: “Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those who I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”

Like Puddleglum plunged his foot into the fire, I think Jesus says, “Buy gold from me, refined by fire.” Where will they find that gold in Laodicea? How will they get it?

Well, remember that over in Smyrna they thought they were wretched, pitiable, and poor, and Jesus says, “You’re rich, Smyrna!” There are few illusions in Smyrna as Polycarp burns at a stake in the Roman coliseum and appears like gold there, together with Jesus!

Laodicea, maybe you could get some gold in Smyrna . . . share in their sufferings, and when you see their sufferings, you will realize this is a fallen, God-damned world, and you need a savior. Not a book, not a class, not a program, but a Savior to reach into the grave and pull you out.

Maybe you’ll see what this world is, you’ll call out in need, and He will cover you in His righteousness; He will anoint your eyes with salve. Jesus makes blind eyes see Him. Then you’ll believe in Him . . . not “Christianity.”

I Peter 1:7: “Our faith is more precious than gold which is refined by fire.” Our faith in Jesus! Where do we buy gold refined by fire? Ask around.

I have a friend in this church . . . very successful in business . . . really a prince to Laodiceans . . . he and his wife adopt hurting children from around the world, and he goes to Africa to “buy gold.” He’s working to supply power to remote, impoverished villages. He could be content with his power and wealth, but he has chosen to share in other sufferings and go places where he has to call out in need, “Jesus, help me! Help me!”

There is a woman in our church. She could be the Queen of Laodicea, if she wanted to be. But she spends her weeks in downtown Denver ministering to homeless people, single mothers, kids stranded in poverty . . . She’s “buying gold.” She doesn’t have to, but she goes there to meet Jesus.

I have a longtime friend in our church. He and his wife became a huge success. Laodicea worked for them. But they know that Laodicea is a lie. So they bought a home for homeless people. It’s how they “buy gold.”

I could go on and on . . . Our mission program is set up to help the wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked; that is, it is set up to help us, not them. Weep with those who weep, pray with those who hurt, buy gold refined by fire.

Where do you buy gold, Laodicea? In the next verse . . .

John sees a door in Heaven, and the Revelation opens up before him—the throne of God Almighty. The Lamb that was slain opens a scroll, four horsemen bringing conquest, warfare, famine, and pestilence.

The rider of the pale horse is death, and there is a Serpent and beasts and a Great Harlot . . . it’s all to help us see Jesus in all His glory. It’s all salve for the blind eyes of Laodicea.

“Laodicea, how dare you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing!’ You are seduced by the Great Harlot riding the Beast under the dominion of Satan! You need Jesus. Laodicea, the horsemen are riding right now: conquest, warfare, famine, pestilence, death, martyrs . . .

“Don’t you read the paper? Stop retreating into your nice, comfortable, American churches, hiding behind your watertight Bible studies and your charts of the End Times. The time is at hand!”

Now, I must confess: The interpretation of the Revelation that I find most unbiblical is the most popular interpretation in America right now. It is peculiarly American and peculiarly recent. It's the bizarre idea that we get raptured in the next verse, so the rest of the Revelation really isn't about us but about those left behind who have to go through the Great Tribulation. It makes most of the book irrelevant to us and us irrelevant to a suffering world. It makes us voyeurs of suffering.

I can see why it's so popular in the United States of America. I'm sure it would have been popular in Laodicea too. But the tribulation was their medicine . . . and our medicine.

Jesus said, "In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." It's in the tribulation that our eyes are opened and we see He has overcome the world. We have cheer!

So stop hiding from your fears . . . stop managing your fears; face your fears . . . even walk right into your fears and realize all your control, management, and ability has been an illusion all along! You need Jesus every second.

Behold, He has been standing, knocking, all along. And communion with you is what He has been wanting all along. So He will press the issue.

Call on Him in need. Behold, it's the very place of your greatest fear that He reveals His greatest glory!

One day they are going to drop you in a grave . . . thanatophobia, zeusophobia, satanophobia, hadeophobia, peccatophobia, stauophobia . . . They'll drop you in a grave, and you'll feel a touch on your thigh. A voice will say, "Friend, let's get out of here! I beat this place!" And you'll see Him.

Where do you buy gold refined by fire? — Come and sup with Him.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, the night before He went to the cross and bore the sins of the world and bore the curses—the wrath—of God Almighty, He took the bread and He broke it. He said, "This is my body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In this same way after supper, He took the cup of the new covenant and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins."

What a frightening place! What a rich place!

Two people lived in a perfect garden. They walked with God and knew God. Everything was beautiful. But a Great Serpent enchanted them with something that was good but something that was taken in the wrong way. And they fell asleep.

But God loved them so much He would stop at nothing to wake them. He cursed the world, subjected the world to futility in hope, but they still wouldn't wake up.

Then He had a marvelous idea, from before the foundation of the world: A Second Adam who would come and stick His foot in the fire. They would see Him, and He would dwell in them. He would wake them up, and they would love Him even more than they did at first, because they would see His glory and grace.

If you were thinking during this sermon, "I just don't know if I have the courage to plunge my foot into the fire," do you see it now? You don't have the courage. But He does, and He did.

His Spirit in you helps you to go to those places where you are afraid to go . . . face those things you are afraid to face . . . see what you were frightened to see—the glory of God the Father in Christ Jesus our Lord.

He will do it. Trust Him. Every day come to Him and say, "Jesus, I need you. I don't even know the places where I am blind; I don't even know the ways that I am asleep. Where I do see it and where I know it, I struggle to have the strength to even do anything about it. I even doubt that you exist. Help me! Help me, Jesus!"

That is music to His ears. That is what He has been waiting to hear. For long ago, we became enchanted, we loved apples more than life.

Trust Him even in the scariest places. Amen.

Further Reading

I have become comfortably numb.

-Pink Floyd

No one is blinder than he who will not see.

-U2, "Stranger in a Strange Land"

The greatest danger to Christianity is, I contend, not heresies, heterodoxies, not atheists, not profane secularism – no, but the kind of orthodoxy which is cordial drivel, mediocrity served up sweet. There is nothing that so insidiously displaces the majestic as cordiality. Perpetually polite, so small, so nice, tampering and meddling and tampering some more – the result is that majesty is completely defrauded – of course, only a little bit. And right here is the danger, for the infinite is more disposed to a violent attack than to becoming a little bit degraded – amid smiling, Christian politeness. And yet this politeness is what our Christianity amounts to. But the very essence of Christianity is utterly opposed to this mediocrity, in which it does not so much die as dwindle away. Today's orthodoxy essentially has its abode in the cordial drivel of family life. This is utterly dangerous for Christianity. Christianity does not oppose debauchery and uncontrollable passions and the like as much as it opposes this flat mediocrity, this nauseating atmosphere, this honey, civil togetherness, where admittedly great crimes, wild excesses, and powerful aberrations cannot easily occur – but where God's unconditional demand has even greater difficulty in accomplishing what it requires: the majestic obedience of submission. . . . The advantages and benefits of earthly life are bound up in mediocrity. But genuine religion has an inverse relationship to the finite. . . . Either all of God and all of you, or nothing at all!

-Soren Kierkegaard

"She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries." . . . "The light of a lamp will never shine in you again. The voice of bridegroom and bride will never be heard in you again. Your merchants were the world's great men. By your magic spell all the nations were led astray. In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth."

-Revelation 18:2b-3, 23-24

The Witch shook her head. "I see," she said, "that we should do no better with your *lion*, as you call it, than we did with your *sun*. You have seen lamps, and so you imagined a bigger and better lamp and called it the *sun*. You've seen cats, and now you want a bigger and better cat, and it's to so called a *lion*. Well, 'tis a pretty make-believe, though, to say truth, it would suit you all better if you were younger. And look how you can put nothing into your make-believe without copying it from the real world, this world of mine, which is the only world. . . . Come, all of you. Put away these childish tricks. I have work for you all in the real world. There is no Narnia, no Overworld, no sky, no sun, no Aslan. And now, to bed all. And let us begin a wiser life tomorrow. But

first, to bed; to sleep; deep sleep, soft pillows, sleep without foolish dreams.” The Prince and the two children were standing with their heads hung down, their cheeks flushed, their eyes half closed; the strength all gone from them; the enchantment almost complete. But Puddleglum, desperately gathering all his strength, walked over to the fire. Then he did a very brave thing. He knew it wouldn’t hurt him quite as much as it would hurt a human; for his feet (which were bare) were webbed and hard and cold-blooded like a duck’s. But he knew it would hurt him badly enough; and so it did. With his bare foot he stamped on the fire, grinding a large part of it into ashes on the flat hearth. And three things happened at once. First, the sweet heavy smell grew very much less. . . . Secondly, the Witch, in a loud, terrible voice, utterly different from all the sweet tones she had been using up till now, called out, “What are you doing? . . .” Thirdly, the pain itself made Puddleglum’s head for a moment perfectly clear and he knew exactly what he really thought. There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic.

-C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*

“Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich”

-Revelation 3:18a

In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy.

-I Peter 1:6-8

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

-Luke 24:28-31

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Forward

Apocalypse Now is really a series of revised sermon transcripts from sermons that I preached at Lookout Mountain Community Church in 2001 and 2002. They have been edited and arranged into the form of three books, by my great assistant Stephanie Trahant (with a little help from me). The whole series was also condensed into the book *Eternity Now!* and then published by Integrity Publishers in 2003.

I wanted to make *Apocalypse Now* available in this form, because a significant amount of material had to be edited out of *Eternity Now* in order to make it one book. We decided not to hide the fact that the chapters in this book are sermons, nor change any time-bound references in the text. That not only means less work for us, but I hope it also means that you are able to sense more clearly that the Apocalypse IS now. Jesus is constantly revealing (apocalypse) Himself and certainly did while we were preaching through the Revelation.

The preface is my Easter sermon from 2002. I dressed up like a castaway (Tom Hanks from the movie *Castaway*) and preached a sermon in the first person as John the Revelator on the island of Patmos. I hope it's not too weird, but what the heck — I'm weird. Each chapter ends with a set of quotes and scripture verses. I include these in the church bulletins each week, and hopefully they can be of help to you here.

The cover of this book is a painting by Marcia Hinds named "Worthy." The painting hung in our sanctuary as we preached through the Apocalypse. Marcia is not only a magnificent artist, but a prayer minister in our church. Indeed *Apocalypse Now* is truly a product of Lookout Mountain Community Church. I'm the mouth, but the body is most impressive. I have to be cautious in thanking people, because there are too many to thank and because it's truly Jesus who does the glorifying in the end. Nonetheless, there are some stories in this book that required GREAT COURAGE on the part of those who allowed me to share them. You know who you are. So we (I believe that "we" includes Jesus) say thank you. You are a revelation of Jesus, as well as His Bride and Body.

Now as you read and study, “May the Father of glory give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might, which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above ALL rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named not only in this age but also in that which is to come.” (Ephesians 1)

-Peter, October 16, 2003