

JANUARY 2020 | ISSUE 11

Godliness. Reverence. Obedience. Worship.

GR W

magazine

a quarterly e-magazine designed to promote
growth in faith and service to God

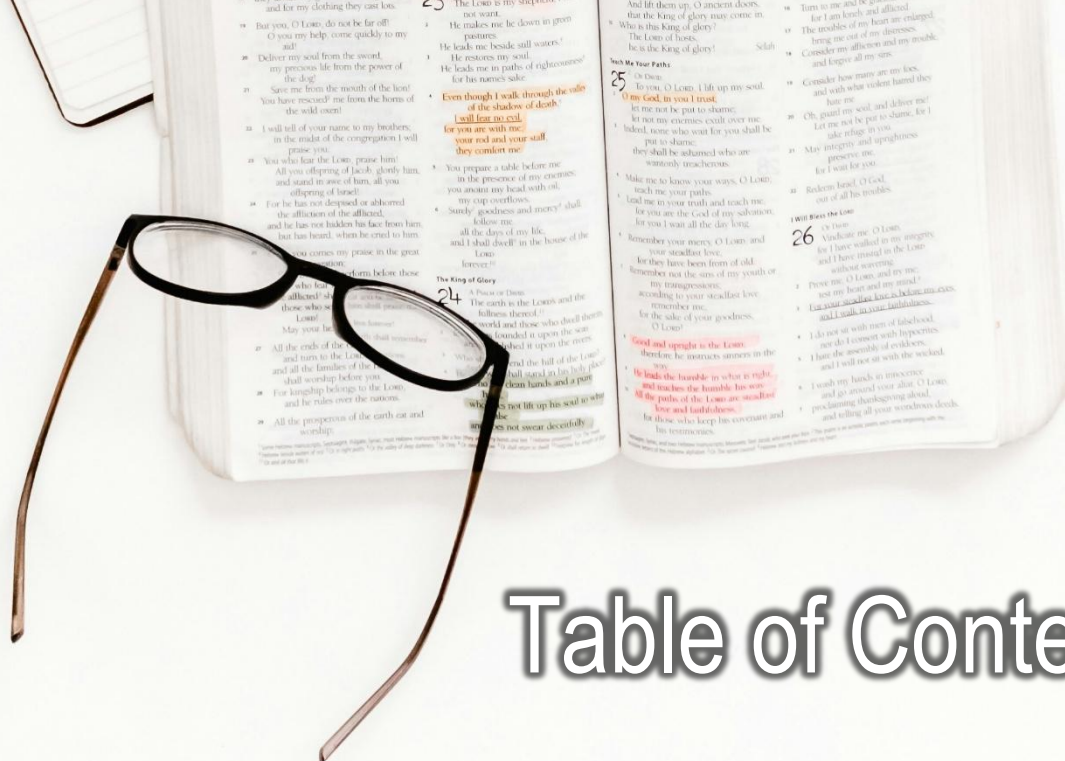


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From the Editors...

Happy New Year!

We're excited for this new year; for new opportunities to learn and to GROW and to serve the Lord. We appreciate our writers who have devoted their time and talents to encourage us to GROW in our faith.

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Now, come GROW with us!

Cordially,
Sean P. Cavender, chief editor
William Stewart, editor & designer



Seeing Exodus In Revelation

SEAN CAVENDER | BALD KNOB, ARKANSAS

Interest in the book of Revelation has heightened over the past several decades, perhaps popularized by the authors of the Left Behind series. They and many other writers present the symbols in Revelation as literal, futuristic, cataclysmic events, leading up to the second coming of Christ. There are a lot of conspiracy-type theories and approaches to the book of Revelation. Many people think they have unearthed “the” single key to help unlock all of the book’s hidden and secret meanings. Media (TV, movies, news) sensationalize the book of Revelation. It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with all the erroneous approaches to the book – suffice it to say we need to teach the book of Revelation.

Sadly, many Christians are afraid of the book of Revelation. The over-zealous, sensational approaches to the book of Revelation creates in many people a sense of dysphoria and confusion. Instead, Revelation should give Christians a sense of hope and confidence; it should not lead people to confusion. There certainly are challenges to the book of Revelation, but it is not impossible to understand.

Problems abound in interpreting the book of Revelation because many people misunderstand apocalyptic literature. People assume apocalyptic literature means it contains predictive prophecy about the end of the world and the return of Jesus. This assumption misses out on the nature and purpose of apocalyptic writings. Again, this would be beyond the purview of our study, but apocalyptic literature was an ancient genre of writing that described historical and contemporary (at the time of the writing) events in an other-worldly way. Apocalyptic literature



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gives a “sneak peek” and “behind the scenes” look at how the events of this world are related to our spiritual purpose.

The goal of this article is to show how the book of Revelation fits within a biblical paradigm, or a mold – offering a point of comparison with something very familiar, and that is relatively easy to understand. When we study the Bible, we will often see connections between books of the Bible. For example, the book of Hebrews can be challenging if we are unfamiliar with the book of Leviticus and the old covenant sacrificial system.

The same is true for the book of Revelation. As the Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament states, “It is generally recognized that Revelation contains more OT references than does any other NT book, although past attempts to tally the total amount have varied...” (p. 1082). Some suggest the Old Testament is referenced a couple of hundred times in the book of Revelation; others count up to 1,000 references in the text. Seeing the OT in the book of Revelation is helpful and points us in the right direction, but it does not give us a clear picture of the function and usage of the Old Testament references.

In spite of its difficulty, Revelation can be understood, and it does not have to be as challenging as we make it seem. I believe the Exodus story with Moses and the children of Israel down in Egypt is especially helpful in understanding what is going on in the book of Revelation. I am not suggesting that I know everything there is to know about the book of Revelation. Neither am I suggesting this is the only way (or even the best way) that Revelation must be read and understood. I do believe this is helpful for me, and I think it can be beneficial to you as well. I am trying to show how a familiar story may help us as a jumping-off point to a clearer understanding of the book of Revelation.

Exodus: Establishing A Paradigm

The book of Exodus begins by telling how the descendants of Jacob were treated in Egypt. They had been enslaved by the Egyptians, who were building their empire at the time. Pharaoh had become afraid of the vast number of Hebrew people, so through slavery, he was able to dominate them. The Egyptian king was so fearful of the population growth of the Hebrews, he determined that every male child born among them was to be killed. The family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were feeling the pressure of intense wickedness and persecution bearing down on them.

The Egyptians were whole-heartedly involved in idolatry. They served a pantheon of gods. Pharaoh was considered to be one of their gods. After the death of the Pharaoh who had commanded the male children to be killed, the children of Israel cried out to God in desperation. The Scripture reads, "Now it came about in the course of those many days that the king of Egypt died. And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God" (Exodus 2:23; NASB95). God heard their cries, and then He called Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Before they were able to leave Egypt, God demonstrated His great power and might against the Egyptian empire, their Pharaoh, and

their gods. God promised His wrath and judgment would come against Egypt for the way they had treated His people (Exodus 7:3-6). The Lord fulfilled His promise by turning the Nile River to blood, covering the land with frogs, sending lice and flies across the land, bringing about the death of cattle, causing boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and finally the death of the firstborn. Through all these plagues, God demonstrated His power against the Egyptians and Pharaoh. Yet throughout the plagues the children of Israel were protected. When all of Egypt's livestock died, the Hebrew's animals were healthy. God protected His people from the plagues the Egyptians were suffering (Exodus 8:22-23; 9:4-6; 11:7).

Soon after the final plague (the death of the firstborn), Pharaoh conceded and allowed Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. God's mighty hand was with them and protected them. God parted the Red Sea so Israel was able to cross on dry ground. After getting rid of Pharaoh's army, the children of Israel sang a song of praise to God (Exodus 15). Under God's guidance and Moses' leadership, the Hebrew people went to Mt. Sinai, where God gave them a law (Exodus 19:1) and renewed His covenant with them (Exodus 19:4-6). Israel would become a kingdom of priests to God. He gave them the Ten Commandments, which above all, demanded absolute loyalty and allegiance to God. If they would be faithful to God, then He promised His love and commitment to Israel for a thousand generations (Exodus 20:6).

The last 15 chapters of Exodus provide the details concerning the construction of the tabernacle, which provided the children of Israel a place to worship God. At the end of the book of Exodus, God's glory filled the tent. Eventually, God told Moses to number the Israelites and take a census, and then they would begin their journey to the promised land (Numbers 1:2).

Reading Revelation As An Exodus Story

Familiarity with the Exodus story above can help us understand the overall message of the book of Revelation. Comparing Exodus with

Revelation can indeed be advantageous to us so that we will no longer be fearful of the message of Revelation.

Just as the children of Israel were persecuted at the hands of wicked Pharaoh (murdering of innocent babies and slavery), in the book of Revelation, the Lord's church is facing persecution. The persecution has led to the spilling of blood and martyrdom. It is stated from the outset of the book, "I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation and kingdom and perseverance which are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Revelation 1:9, NASB95). One of the most potent visions in the entire book is when the souls who had been slain and were underneath the altar cry out for God's vengeance (Revelation 6:9-11). Remember when Israel cried out to God because of the harsh treatments that Egypt had forced them to endure? God remembered the covenant and then unleashed plagues on Egypt. Well, the book of Revelation shows us something similar.

The faithful and obedient saints faced persecution and martyrdom. God revealed His judgments and plagues against those who were causing such oppression to the church. The seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls all contain a series of plagues against those who are wicked, rebellious, and refuse to repent. Notably, in these judgments and plagues, there are correlations with the plagues God brought upon Egypt: hail (Revelation 8:7); water becoming blood (Revelation 8:8-9); darkness (Revelation 8:12); locusts (Revelation 9:7); and frogs (Revelation 16:13). God protected Israel from the plagues in Egypt; He also offers His protection for His people who have the seal of God (Revelation 7:1-8).

In the book of Revelation, Satan is ultimately the one who is wreaking havoc in the churches. When the dragon is unable to defeat Christ, he turns against the covenant people of God (pictured as the woman and her children who keep God's commandments, Revelation 12:17). God offered protection for the church, His covenant people who have been sealed, by delivering them on the wings of a great eagle

(Revelation 12:14). The wilderness becomes a symbol of refuge and covenant renewal in the book of Revelation (Revelation 12:6). Revelation promises that God's people will ultimately be brought to a place of safety and refuge.

Following the children of Israel's exodus from Egypt, they were taken through the wilderness to Mt. Sinai where they received the Law of God and entered a covenant with God. The Lord reminded them of His great power: "'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself'" (Exodus 19:4, NASB95).

Revelation 14 is a beautiful picture of the saints who have overcome the ploys and plots of the evil one. They have been faithful to God, even to the point of death. They did not turn to serve idols or succumb to the pressures of persecution. They did not compromise their convictions — they served God and Him alone. Therefore, they are blessed to enjoy rest from their labors (Revelation 14:13). So they stand by the sea singing the song of Moses and song of the Lamb — a poignant scene that reminds us of the children of Israel singing and praising God after they saw pharaoh's army defeated and drowned in the Red Sea. Then the tabernacle of heaven is opened, and the glory of the Lord is seen (Revelation 15:5-6), reminding us of the closing chapter of Exodus.

In Revelation 17 & 18, Babylon the great falls. Babylon is symbolic of a world empire which, similar to Egypt, had conquered the children of Israel and deported them out of Jerusalem and Judea. God brought judgment upon ancient Babylon. Eventually, Jews have a second "exodus story." Ezra led the Jews back home. The importance of "Babylon" in Revelation is that the world empire that is persecuting God's people will be destroyed. God would judge the idolatrous worship and the wickedness that was so prominent because of the impenitence of heart (Revelation 9:20-21).

Ultimately, the book of Revelation shows us that God's people will be victorious. Just as Israel looked defeated at the beginning of the book of Exodus, it ended with them worshiping God in the wilderness — out of Egypt. The book

of Revelation offers a similar picture. There is hope, victory, and vindication for those who remain pure and firm in their conviction. Our allegiance is to be given to God and Him alone. If we are found faithful, then we will reign with Christ and dwell before God's throne (Revelation 20-22).

The message in the book of Revelation is one that encourages faithfulness. It should not lead us to fear; instead, we should find confidence in the victory God has promised to those who are faithful to Him. God will give us the crown of life if we remain loyal and devoted to Him!

The Church As The Kingdom

JESSE FLOWERS | BAYTOWN, TEXAS

The word of God presents the church of our Lord in descriptive and marvelous terms. The description that is used more than any other in depicting the church to us in the Bible is “kingdom.”

The expression “the kingdom of God” is used approximately sixty-nine times in the New Testament. Most of those occurrences are in the four gospel accounts, with only fifteen instances outside of those first four books. The expression “the kingdom of heaven” is used thirty-two times in the New Testament, all of which are exclusive to the Gospel of Matthew.

Let us notice the following points about the kingdom:

It was at hand during the earthly ministries of John and Christ.

The very first truth that was declared about the kingdom in the New Testament was that it was at hand, and the very first person to announce and preach about the kingdom was John. *“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight’”* (Matthew 3:1-3). Try to imagine if you heard this sort of message for the very first time. What thoughts would go through your mind as a Jew?

Jesus as well, when He began His earthly ministry, announced the approach of the kingdom. *“From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’”* (Matthew 4:17). Later, we find Jesus sending out the twelve apostles with



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the command: *“But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is at hand’”* (Matthew 10:6-7).

Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom. Leading up to the Sermon on the Mount, we read how *“Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom...”* (Matthew 4:23). In Mark’s gospel, we read: *“Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’”* (Mark 1:14-15).

The kingdom was foretold in prophecy.

When the multitudes heard John, Jesus, and the twelve apostles preach the gospel of the kingdom, proclaiming that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” what would have come to their minds? Surely, specific Old Testament prophecies that foretold of the kingdom would have excitedly come to mind.

About a thousand years before Christ, God sent the prophet Nathan to King David with this message: *“When your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed*

after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:12-13). Later we read in Psalm 132:11, “The LORD has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it: ‘I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body.’”

Around seven hundred years before Christ’s coming, Isaiah prophesied: *“For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this” (Isaiah 9:6-7)*

Over 500 years before Christ’s arrival, Daniel interpreted King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, prophesying: *“And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44). “All these kingdoms”* refer to four earthly kingdoms spoken of in the context of chapter 2: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. *“And in the days of these kings,”* both biblically and historically refers to the Roman Empire, which ruled the world at the time of John (Luke 2:1-2) and Christ (Luke 3:1).

Another key prophecy about the kingdom in the book of Daniel is in chapter 7. *“I was watching in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve*

Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall not be destroyed” (7:13-14; cf. 2:44; Ephesians 1:20-23).

The nature of this kingdom is unique.

The kingdom is not of this world. When Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, He declared: *“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.” Pilate, therefore, said to Him, ‘Are You a king then?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice” (John 18:36-37).*

The kingdom is spiritual in nature. *“Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, ‘See here!’ or ‘See there!’ For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:20-21).* This kingdom was not physical or earthly like Babylon or Rome.

The kingdom is eternal in its duration. The angel Gabriel came to Mary announcing: *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31-33).* Consider how this connects to the prophecies found in 2 Samuel 7:12-13; Isaiah 9:6-7, and Daniel 2:44; 7:13-14.

Jesus identified the kingdom as His church.

*“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **My church**, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of **the kingdom of heaven**, and*

whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). The church built by Christ and belonging to Christ is the kingdom of Christ!

Jesus prophesied the establishment of the kingdom.

*“Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with **power**” (Mark 9:1). Jesus promised that within the lifetime of His disciples they would witness the powerful arrival of the kingdom.*

Before His ascension into heaven, Christ instructed His apostles: *“Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with **power** from on high” (Luke 24:49). Similarly, in Acts 1, we read Him saying, “But you shall receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witness to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (v 8).*

We see the fulfillment of the Lord’s prophecy on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 when the apostles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and preached the gospel of Christ. The apostle Peter declared Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ, the Son of God whom they crucified, whom God raised from the dead, and is now seated at the right hand of God in heaven (Acts 2:22-36).

The Scriptures present the kingdom as being established following Pentecost.

Philip preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Christ in Samaria (Acts 8:12). Paul preached the kingdom of God in all of Asia (Acts 20:25). In writing to the saints in Colosse, Paul stated how God *“has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love” (Colossians 1:13). And the*

John spoke of himself as being a companion with his brethren in the kingdom of Jesus (Revelation 1:9).

Salvation depends on entering the kingdom.

Jesus taught: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The Spirit revealed the word of God, the gospel, that must be heard, believed, and obeyed (Romans 10:17; 1:16). “Born of water” refers to the new birth that occurs in baptism (Romans 6:3-4). Jesus later commanded His disciples, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15-16). The apostle Peter wrote: “Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been **born again**, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Peter 1:22-23). On the Day of Pentecost, the same apostle explained to sinners, pierced in the heart, by the preaching of the gospel how to enter the kingdom, the Lord’s church. “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit ... Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them ... And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:38, 41, 47).*

Christians are to seek first the kingdom of God.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught: *“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Our daily purpose and priority must be the kingdom of God. We must advance the kingdom of Christ among*

men. We do this by making the King's will the priority of our life. Our interests, motives, objectives, and conduct are for its honor and advancement. As a result, Christ and His gospel are advanced!

What Does The Term “Worship” Really Mean?

WILLIAM STEWART | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

A myriad of writers through the years have penned much literature on the topic of worship. If one were to compile all the “worship is” statements obtainable, an exhaustive volume would no doubt be the result. So, we might inquire, *“Why, after all the effort put forth by men and women through the years, do we yet again embark on a discourse about the meaning of worship?”* Quite simply, it is good to be reminded of the things which we already know, and perhaps to be made aware of some things we have not known. The more we study and learn about the worship which our God is due, the greater our appreciation and more devoted our service will be.

It has been said, *“The instinct to worship is hardly less strong than the instinct to eat.”*¹ And again, *“...if he would, man cannot live all to this world. If not religious, he will be superstitious. If he worship not the true God, he will have his idols.”*² We cannot choose to not worship. God desires that we worship Him, but if we do not, inevitably someone or something else will be the object of our adoration. Worship is a primary tendency of humanity, which is built into our very nature.

Karl Barth, a twentieth-century Protestant theologian wrote, *“Christian worship is the most momentous, the most urgent, the most glorious action that can take place in human life.”*³ Given the magnitude of such a statement, we should expect all men to joyfully render praise before our God, but it is not so. Some *“...did not like to retain God in their knowledge...”* (Romans 1:28), and thus walk in wickedness and futility, worshipping things created rather than the Creator. However, for those who are determined to be faithful servants of the LORD, we should heighten our



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understanding of worship, that it might be altogether momentous, urgent, and glorious.

The word most commonly translated as worship from the Old Testament is the Hebrew *shachah* meaning to *“...prostrate (especially reflexive, in homage to royalty or God): – bow (self) down, crouch, fall down (flat), humbly beseech, do (make) obeisance, do reverence, make to stoop, worship.”*⁴ This is the word used by Abraham when he and Isaac set out to sacrifice to the LORD (Genesis 22:5).

In the New Testament, the most commonly used word to speak of worship is the Greek *proskuneo*. Thayer remarks of *proskuneo*, *“...to kiss the hand to (towards) one, in token of reverence; hence among the Orientals, esp. the Persians, to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence; in the N.T. by kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance, whether in order to express respect or make supplication.”*⁵ Vine observes that *proskuneo* and four less-used words which are also translated from Greek to English as worship, *“...broadly it may be regarded as the direct acknowledgment to God, of His nature, attributes, ways and claims,*

whether by the outgoing of the heart in praise and thanksgiving or by deed done in such acknowledgement.”⁶

Worship involves both attitudes and actions. It is not enough to have a spirit of adoration toward God without doing that which He has proclaimed to be accepted and appropriate in worship to Him (Luke 6:46). Neither is it sufficient to supply the outward service which God has enjoined upon us but to do so with emptiness of heart (Matthew 19:16-22; cf. Matthew 6:19-21). Both the correct attitude and action are necessary.

Our perception of worship should not be too limited. The Psalmist wrote, *“Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments”* (Psalm 119:164). Clement of Alexandria, a late second-century teacher and apologist, having quoted this, went on to speak of Christian worship as that which is *“...not in a specified place, or selected temple, or at certain festivals and on appointed days, but during his whole life ... persuaded that God is altogether on every side present, we cultivate our fields, praising; we sail the sea, hymning...”* He continues, *“His sacrifices are prayers, and praises, and readings in the Scriptures before meals, and psalms and hymns during meals and before bed, and prayers also again during night. By these he unites himself to the divine choir, from continual recollection, engaged in contemplation which has everlasting remembrance.”⁷*

Worship is far more than an activity that we engage in on Sunday morning for an hour or two while the saints are assembled. Worship is not about where we are (John 4:21), but who we are (John 4:23-24) and what we are doing (Acts 2:42; James 5:13; Psalm 145:1-2; 146:1-2). David spoke to the LORD, *“Thus I will bless You while I live; I will lift up my hands in Your name. My soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth shall praise You with*

joyful lips. When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches” (Psalm 63:4-6). If we only worship the Lord at scheduled assembly times, we have misunderstood the nature of worship. Paul taught those at Athens, *“God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands”* (Acts 17:24). Why then should we, like the heathen, confine our worship to a particular location or time, as though God were nothing more than an idol? As much as our God is ever-present (Psalm 139:7-10), we should feel compelled to worship Him anywhere and anytime.

We need to be cautioned of an alternate extreme. One writer articulates well a movement that is underway: *“God wants our lives to be a seamless cord of worship. God wants our worship to be a way of life.”⁸* Certainly, we ought to worship God daily, but that does not make every aspect of life worship. After citing a number of excellent examples, one brother in Christ affirms, *“It may be said that all worship is serving God, but not everything that we do in serving God is worship.”⁹* It is an important distinction. We are called to be *“...a living sacrifice ... not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed...”* (Romans 12:1). Righteous living brings glory to God, but a righteous life is not a form of worship. It is our *“reasonable service”* before God. Bondservants are commanded to serve their masters *“...heartily, as to the Lord...”* (Colossians 3:23). The fear of God (v 22) and promise of reward from Him (v 24) certainly embolden us to work as best we can, but again, this is not worship. It is another aspect of our faithful service before God and man.

What a privilege it is to worship the true God of heaven, the One who has both created us and to this day sustains us. May we with thankful hearts, in confidence through Jesus our Lord approach before Him often, rendering acceptable worship. *“Therefore by Him let us continually*

offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name”
(Hebrews 13:15).

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Faithfulness In The Midst Of Persecution

ALEX HALE | CABOT, ARKANSAS

In his book, *Five Cries of Youth*, Merton Strommen asserts that the loudest cry of young people is their need to be accepted or loved. As we think about our youth, do we not find that to be true? Many times our self-worth was tied to the opinions of others. Perhaps, for this reason, you wore your hair a certain way or dressed according to the trends of the day. Young people often struggle because of an inferiority complex, which stems from the idea that no one loves or appreciates them. We long to be loved and accepted.

This particular “cry” does not leave us as we get older. Adults still tend to say and do things to impress or gain the approval of others. I certainly do not mean to rain on anyone’s parade, but Jesus warns us that if we follow Him, we should expect the exact opposite of love and admiration. Just a few hours before His arrest, Jesus told His disciples, *“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you”* (John 15:19).

Suffering comes when one follows Christ.

His words in John 15 are not the only time the Bible tells us to expect persecution (see also Matthew 24:9; Philippians 1:29; 1 Thessalonians 3:3-4; 2 Timothy 3:12; 1 Peter 4:12-13). In spite of what many in the religious world may tell you, Jesus did not teach a prosperity gospel. Instead, He preached a gospel that prepared His followers for persecution. We should not be surprised when it comes. The Lord said, *“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you”* (John 15:20).



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Nowhere is this more evident than in the book of Revelation. John makes it clear to the brethren in Asia Minor that their profession of faith was the cause of their suffering. The apostle had been exiled to Patmos, an island in the Aegean Sea, roughly 60 miles from his home in Ephesus. He stated he had been placed there *“on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”* (1:9). In that same verse, John calls himself a *“partner in the tribulation.”* This statement meant that the brethren in Asia Minor were being tried and persecuted for the same cause as John – the cause of Christ (2:10; 6:9; 20:4).

John calls for their faithfulness by highlighting Jesus’ suffering. Jesus refers to Himself as the *“faithful ... witness”* (3:14; cf. 19:11), a term used in Revelation to refer to martyrdom (2:13). When John sees Jesus in the throne room, he sees a Lamb standing as though it had been slain (5:6), an image which takes the reader back to Jesus as the suffering servant led as a lamb to the slaughter (Isaiah 53:7). If the world treated Jesus in such a fashion, His followers should not expect any different.

The persecution comes from an enemy who has been defeated. Satan is the one behind the suffering (12:9). Satan continuously worked to oppose the purposes of God in Christ. He desired to devour Jesus at birth (12:4; Matthew 2:16). When he was unable to do so, he sought to defeat the Lord through temptation (Matthew 4). When that did not work, he attempted to stop the Savior through physical death (Hebrews 2:14). However, the resurrection dealt Satan a blow from which he could never recover.

Because of what Christ has done, Satan's power is limited (John 12:31; 16:11; Genesis 3:15). Though Satan was able to stand before God as the accuser (Job 1:6, 9-11; Zechariah 3:1), there is no longer any place for him to accuse the faithful (12:10). The earth is the only place left for him (12:12). We cannot miss this, however – though he has been defeated, Satan continues to fight (1 Peter 5:8). He unleashes his fury against those who keep the commandments of God and keep the testimony of Christ. His main supports in this cause are often those with political or even religious power (Revelation 13). Certainly, this was true in the days of the first-century church, which was persecuted and martyred. The same continues today.

Such suffering can come in a variety of forms. In speaking to the church in Smyrna about their tribulation, Jesus mentions at least three kinds of suffering (2:9-10).

1. *Poverty.* We understand that financial success is often directly related to “who you know.” Jews had built up relationships with other Jewish businessmen and patrons (as well as with the Romans). Pagans had established ties with others who shared their beliefs and interests. Christians were left on the outside looking in. Many of the significant aspects of life in first-century Asia Minor were tied to the predominant idolatrous

religions of the day (specifically emperor worship). Assimilation would have been financially advantageous to the Christians, who refused to participate in pagan sacrifices, rituals, and celebrations. As a result, though society may have been thriving financially, Jesus' followers were not. Yet, in spite of their poverty, Jesus says that they were rich. Though earthly riches can be a blessing, there are times when we must be willing to forsake those things to stand up for what is right. It is better to suffer for what is right than to have earthly success and forsake godly principles.

2. *Slander.* With regard to Smyrna, Jesus speaks of the harassment which came at the hands of the Jews. In the mind of the Lord, these Jews have forfeited their right to be called God's chosen because they have rejected Jesus and are now working as Satan's agents. It is likely that in first-century Asia Minor (particularly in Smyrna and Philadelphia), some of the greatest opposition for the churches came from the Jewish community. This persecution would have followed a pattern, beginning in the early days of the church (Acts 9:23; 13:45, 50; 14:19; 17:5, 13; 20:19).

One of the main tactics used by the Jews was slander, as they worked to build distrust of Christians by the Roman authorities. Early disciples were accused of a range of behaviors, including cannibalism, orgies, incest, atheism, and treason. Even today, people use unwholesome speech as an effective means to malign those who would follow Jesus. Christians are labelled as narrow-minded bigots because of our commitment to the timeless truths of Scripture. Jesus taught that having people speak evil against you falsely for His sake was a blessing and a sign of one's faithfulness (Matthew 5:11-12; Luke 6:26).

3. *Physical harm, including death.* Jesus does not always promise that the suffering will get better in this life. Yet Jesus urged His followers to remain faithful, even to the point of death (2:10). Christians in first-century Asia Minor are not the only ones to experience such persecutions. Around the world today, those who profess faith in Jesus are the victims of religiously motivated violence and oppression.

What can we do?

1. *Recognize that persecution is not just something that happens “over there.”* The violent persecutions experienced by brethren, both in first-century Asia Minor and around the world today, began with intolerance. In the judgment of this writer, this is where our country finds itself today. America is becoming increasingly hostile to Christians.
2. *Don’t expect the government to save the day.* Governments should be an authority for good (Romans 13:1-4), but this is not always the case. Just as Satan used the worldly power of the Roman Empire to do his bidding, he can find support for his “war on the saints” in today’s earthly powers. Even governments

established on principles of righteousness can stray from such foundations. Though at this point, the United States government mostly protects our religious liberties, our government also sanctions and even promotes all kinds of immoral behaviors. Furthermore, many who are in power seek to end religious freedoms that do not align with their personal views. We must be ready to stand alone against unrighteousness if and when our society completely loses its way (Ephesians 5:7-11; Philippians 2:14-16).

3. *Find our hope in the One seated upon the throne.* All that the first-century Christians could see was suffering, and it was going to get worse economically, politically, and socially. As we look at our world, this may be what we see as well. Yet when we look at things from a heavenly perspective, we see something different (4:1-11). God’s throne supersedes the thrones of men. A heavenly perspective of world events will not reveal a president or military leader ruling the world, but rather God firmly in control of both heaven and earth.

Web-Based Evangelism

WILLIAM STEWART | KINGSTON, ONTARIO

“The only constant is change.” This axiom has been attributed to the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, though it is likely a variation on his much simpler yet equally perceptive observation, *“Everything changes.”*¹ The point is clear – we live in a world that is always changing. John F. Kennedy said much the same thing in a speech on June 25, 1963 at the Assembly Hall (Paulskirche) in Frankfurt, Germany. He affirmed, *“Change is the law of life. And those who look to the past or present are certain to miss the future.”*²

Kennedy’s remark is wonderfully astute. There is nothing wrong with fondly remembering the past and certainly we must live in the present, however, if we do not prepare for the future, we will find ourselves left behind. The 21st century is not the same as the 20th century was. You can find a myriad of articles online highlighting how things have changed in the last 100 years, 50 years, even 20 years. Every aspect of life has had some degree of change, and many of those changes relate in some way to technology, and in particular, the internet.

How people seek and access information has changed drastically in the past 20 years. Phone books and yellow pages have been replaced by the internet. A Forbes article from April 2018 focused on the importance of the internet to small businesses observed *“...97% of consumers use the internet to find local businesses...”*³ That is significant for the tailors, hairdressers, travel agents, plumbers, general contractors and such in our communities. However, the impact of online searches by consumers is not limited to the business world. People are searching the internet for information to better themselves. They are looking for exercises, recipes, and advice on



various health-related issues, but folks are also searching for spiritual matters on the internet. There are seekers in your community now who are looking for answers to their Bible questions. Some are even searching the internet to find a place to worship. If we (the church) do not have an online presence they will not find us.

Not long ago, having an online presence simply meant you had a web site. Now it means so much more than that. There are a variety of access points available for churches to make information available to potential contacts, and many of them are free! This is by no means an extensive list, but here are several ways local churches should connect with seekers online:

- Web site: Every local church needs to have a web site. The main page should have essentials like where the congregation meets, service times and ways for the seeker to contact you. If the church has a bulletin, make the articles available on the site. Other useful things to include would be information about upcoming events (gospel meetings, VBS, etc), an archive of sermons or studies, and links to social media profiles (Facebook, YouTube, etc). Years ago, unless you knew HTML coding, you would have to spend a lot

of money on a web designer to have a professional-looking site. That is no longer the case. If someone in the congregation is mildly computer savvy, they should be able to easily maintain a page using WordPress, CongreGATE or some similar platform. With the prevalence of smartphone usage today, it is essential for the church to have a mobile-enabled site.

- Facebook: According to Pew Research Center⁴ almost 70% of Americans use Facebook. If 7 out of every 10 people in your community are on Facebook, then the church should be there too. For Facebook to generate contacts, it is key to create a following. This can be done by having members “like” the congregation’s Facebook page and share content that is posted. Also, you can create ads and “boost” posts on Facebook to reach out to the community; again, creating a following for the page and hopefully opening the door for studies with contacts.
- YouTube: The same Pews Research Center article indicates 73% of US adults use YouTube. Almost 3 of every 4 of your neighbours are watching videos on YouTube. Are they watching YouTube videos made available by the local church? If the church is video recording sermons, YouTube is a great place to share such with the world (and it’s free). In fact, you are able to live stream the services of the church with YouTube (which can be profitable for those who are sick or shut-in from among our number). Lessons can be archived in playlists and made searchable. In an age where most people want to check things out before they would consider showing up, YouTube offers a unique opportunity to do so. Similar to the Facebook page, people can become followers of a YouTube channel, which hopefully gives the opportunity to eventually meet them and

with them in person.

- Meetup.com: Meetup is a great platform for connecting with people. There are a variety of social groups to bring people together. You can gather with others in your area who share the same interests (exercising, movies, games, spelunking, etc.). The church can use meetup.com to schedule and host community Bible studies. To be a Meetup host, you need a paid account. We’ve had good results using Meetup where I preach. A helpful hint – use a descriptive name for your Meetup group (ie. Kingston Bible Study). Meetup does an exceptional job with placement in Google searches!
- Google.com: Speaking about Google, have you claimed your Google My Business listing? Do a search for the local church on Google and look to the right side of the page. There will be a link to “claim this business.” Once you have claimed the listing, you can create posts, add photos and information, encourage others to write reviews and link the listing to the church’s web site. And best of all, it’s free.

A few final things...

- Appearance is important. Whatever the platform, pay attention to aesthetics. We clean the meeting place, mow the grass, paint both the exterior and interior – we understand the importance of appearance. The same is true for our online presence.
- Keep things up to date. Have relevant and current content. Inform folks of upcoming events on every online medium possible. Posting title page images for upcoming PowerPoint sermons or compelling graphics are useful to capture attention and hopefully cultivate contacts.
- Like, share, review. Members should “like,” “follow,” “join,” or whatever the unique platform. This is how sites, pages, profiles

and channels grow. Be connected and then be active. Share. Comment. Encourage members to take an active role in the church's online activities. As they do so, their family, friends, co-workers, neighbours and others will regularly be encouraged to check out the Lord's church. Have members write reviews. Reviews will help visitors to the church's social media sites to learn about

and hopefully encourage interest in the local church.

Doubtless there could be much more said about web-based evangelism, but we will allow the above to suffice for now.

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- 1 [Heraclitus](#)
 - 2 [Kennedy](#)
 - 3 [Forbes](#)
 - 4 [Pew Research Center](#)

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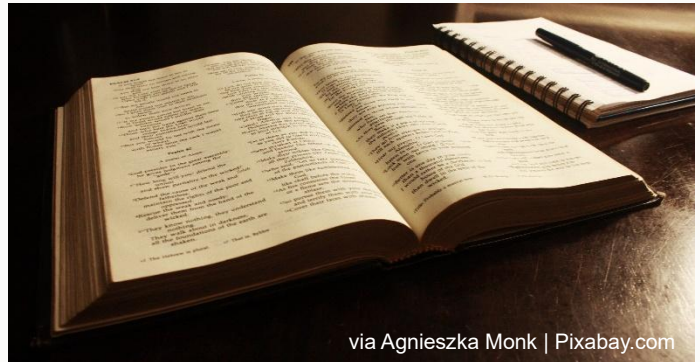
The Words of the Preacher

JEREMY DIESTELKAMP | TORONTO, ONTARIO

“Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the difficult days come, and the years draw near when you say, ‘I have no pleasure in them.’”
(Ecclesiastes 12:1)

This verse has been used by preachers over the years to exhort people, especially young people, to turn to God now while they can, because there will come a time when such will be too late. Hearing these types of sermons as a young person was important to me, for they got me to think about my position in this universe, how there is a God who created all things, and with that being true, I needed to serve Him. In short, it was sermons like these that convinced me that I needed to become a Christian. These words, however, were not written at the beginning of this book, they appear at the conclusion, so it is good to consider the whole context, to see if there is some deeper meaning to them.

The book of Ecclesiastes was written by “*the son of David, king of Jerusalem*” (Ecclesiastes 1:1, 12). We would know this man as Solomon (1 Kings 1:32-35). In verse 1 of chapter 1, he describes what he was writing as the “*words of the Preacher*,” which is why the book itself is called “Ecclesiastes,” a term that means one who exhorts an assembly. When Solomon writes Ecclesiastes, he is seemingly an old man describing his own life and the results of his pursuit of happiness. He sought happiness in pleasure but found none there (Ecclesiastes 2:1-26). Solomon sought happiness in work but found none there (Ecclesiastes 4:1-8). He sought happiness in popularity but found none there (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16). Solomon sought happiness in money but found none there



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(Ecclesiastes 2:1-26). Solomon sought happiness in work but found none there (Ecclesiastes 4:1-8). He sought happiness in popularity but found none there (Ecclesiastes 4:13-16). Solomon sought happiness in money but found none there (Ecclesiastes 5:8-20). He sought happiness in all of the places where many people in this world seek happiness. However, just like Solomon, they too do not find happiness there. It is all vanity, not because these things are necessarily sinful, but because we will leave all of these things behind when we die, and thus will largely be forgotten by history as time marches on (Ecclesiastes 1:3-11). So true were Solomon’s words in that verse, for today, many in the secular archeological world doubt that he ever existed, in spite of his great wealth and wisdom.

If someone were to describe the reign of Solomon, one would conclude that it started righteously and with an eye towards God. In 1 Kings 3, Solomon said,

“...You have shown great mercy to Your servant David, my father, because he walked before You in truth, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with You; You have continued this great kindness for him, and You have given him a

son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. Now, O Lord my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore, give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?" (1 Kings 3:6-11).

Solomon demonstrated great trust in God as a youth, however, over time, in the pursuit of happiness, he left God and turned his heart after the gods of the many wives he had (1 Kings 11:1-13). His departure from God is the reason the kingdom of Israel would be rent in two during the reign of his son, Rehoboam. Solomon's reign was the reign of what could have been, if only he had kept his eyes on God. It is with these things in mind that we now come to the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes.

Solomon said to remember our Creator in the days of our youth because he had forgotten his Creator, Jehovah, and now regrets his life (Ecclesiastes 12:1). He was also facing difficult days not only because he was old, and it was harder to move, but because God was punishing him for his sins (1 Kings 11:14-25). Serving our Creator is easier in our youth than only beginning to do so after advancing in age. Why is that? For starters, those who are young have not yet had *"the sun and the light, the moon and the stars"* become darkened, meaning that a young person still has the full ability to see (Ecclesiastes 12:2). Our eyesight is of great value in the kingdom of God, for we can study the Scriptures quicker than those who cannot see, making it easier to continue to

grow in the Word. Second, those who are youths have not yet had *"the keepers of the house tremble or the strong men bow down,"* meaning that a youth's body remains strong and able to move with relative ease (Ecclesiastes 12:3). Having full use of our body is of great value in the kingdom of God, for we can travel farther than those who cannot walk, thus allowing us to go to more distant places in the spreading of the Gospel. Third, those who are youth have not yet had the *"grinders cease because they are few"* or *"the daughters of music brought low,"* meaning that a young person still has all of their teeth, and their voice is strong (Ecclesiastes 12:3-5). Having our teeth and a voice that is loud enough to speak is of great value in the kingdom of God, for we are more able to preach and teach the message than those who have lost such ability. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, those who are young have not yet had *"the silver cord loosed"* or *"the golden bowl broken,"* meaning that a youth's body has yet to return to the earth as it was, nor has their spirit returned to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:6-8). Being alive on this earth is of great value in the kingdom of God, for only those who are alive can spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Those who are dead, though they may have lived great lives of faith, will leave everything they have done behind, and their deeds will largely be forgotten.

Death should not frighten those who have remembered their Creator, even if it wasn't from their youth because God has promised to save those by grace who faithfully obey Him. He also promises for those who follow Him, that they have the hope of eternal life (Ephesians 2:8; 1 Peter 1:3-5). Solomon tells us what God demands of us. We are to *"Fear God and keep His commandments"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). This is our sole duty. Our purpose is not to become rich and powerful. Neither is our purpose in life to become famous. Our responsibility is to respect God and to love Him with all our heart,

soul, and mind. Respect and love for God will manifest itself in doing all that He says. For people today, that involves our believing in His Son Jesus Christ as the Son of God, repenting of our sins, confessing our faith before others, and being baptized for the remission of our sins. Furthermore, we are expected to live a godly life unto death, fully trusting in the grace of God to save us (John 8:24; Acts 2:38; Romans 10:9-10; Acts 22:16; Revelation 2:10). Why is it so

important that we do this? It is important for one day, “...*God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil*” (Ecclesiastes 12:14). Nobody will escape the judgment of God. Are you prepared for the Judgment Day? If not, then the words of the preacher are a warning for you to now consider your life and to obey God, for tomorrow is never guaranteed.

** All verses are from the New King James Version of the Bible unless indicated otherwise

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