1. **Revelation 8-11**

A quick recap:

John is taken into heaven and sees a great vision of “The Son of Man” – Jesus

Jesus gives him a message for each of the churches: Good, could be better and a promise.

Going through a door John finds that there is no one worthy to open the seal or fix the issues of the world: sin; suffering and death.

But he hears the elder say “Behold the Lion of the Tribe of Judah.” But when he looks it is actually the lamb of God, slaughtered.

The lamb opens the scroll. But instead of all good news evil continues apparently unabated. Violence; war and power; inequality and death. The four horse of the apocalypse.

And the martyrs cry out from under the alter of God in heaven for justice but are asked to be patient.

And a great shaking of powers and authorities on earth are promised with fear of God coming over the people.

Then John hears 144000 Israelites from every tribe but again when he turns to look he sees a great multitude from every nation. The faithful followers of Jesus celebrating God’s victory and their deliverance.

Before the final seal is opened it is so awesome that there is silence in heaven for ½ hour.

1. **Questions**
2. **A reminder: this book is a 1st Century revelation of Jesus; against the Roman Empire; for the Church(es); for the purpose of worship; encouragement and hope.**

The key question being asked over and over is: will and if so how will the church of Jesus remain faithful in face of persecution, tribulation and trial.

1. The book is not laid out chronologically but told in a series of circles as shown. A series of 7’s interrupted by victory visions. If we are to interpret the message understanding this sequence is really important.
2. And now we are introduced to the next cycle of seven. Out of the seventh seal come the seven trumpets. But first something must happen that allows heaven and earth to once again overlap.
3. In 5:8 we are told about the prayers of the faithful being like incense before the throne. And an angel is given a golden censor with incense and prayers.

Jewish commentators on the book of Revelation – and there are a surprising number, emphasise that the silence in heaven is needed to allow the prayers of the people to be heard.

And the response is a throwing down to the earth fire from the alter.

1. In our sinful state and until sin and evil are finally dealt with all the earth can hear from heaven is judgement. And so ends this section of the book and each section of the book, with: thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and earthquake. 8:5; 11:19; 16:18

Remember it is a circular telling. Same events told in different ways.

1. But now we get to the events described in 8:6:13

It is said that many people want to serve God….but only in an advisory capacity.

Right now I can identify. The elders and the animals and all heaven has been proclaiming how good God is and then he does this.

Of course maybe we have forgotten just how bad sin is. We have a lie in the West that the world and people are basically good and where there is sin we can deal with it by enlightenment. The lie is that the world is basically getting better because humans are basically good.

John is also writing in a styalised way with symbols. He is not necessarily talking about wiping out a 1/3 of humanity but: He was talking about God’s drastic action to purify the world, to cut it back as one would with a tree that had become dangerously diseased, removing the deadly cancer so that the rest may be saved[[1]](#footnote-1)

And somehow this is the cry of the martyrs.

A second insight may be required: who generally causes death; war and poison/pollution? Humans? What are humans doing to each other?

1. Finally, these and the bowels are a kind of re-run of the plagues of Egypt. The Passover played a huge role in the book already. Jesus the true Passover lamb. It plays a huge role in the gospels. Not just the Passover meal but Jesus is killed at the Passover. The lambs sacrifice and it’s blood splashed over the doorposts saves them from the curse and frees them from slavery.

Jesus death in the same way saves us from the curse of sin and sets us free from slavery to sin. But the plagues were also a defeat of each of the major Egyptian Gods. The cross is the defeat of the God’s of this world.

And so whatever the means: direct from God or through people and their selfish acts, the inhabitance of the earth are being warned to let the people of God go. Let them go free.

1. But it is not just people who are being warned and judged. Vs 12 has resonance with Isaiah 14:12 and the devil and his angels a 1/3 in total being cast down from the heavens.

His whole book is about the re-establishment of the rule of heaven on earth itself. As with all radical regime changes, those who profit from the present one will need dire warnings if they are to realise the seriousness of their plight.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But the hope here is that God’s kingdom will be established even when it looks nothing like it right now.

1. **Chapter 9**

We have moved from what might be called natural disasters and entered a horror film. 2 supernatural pictures of fear and horror emanating from the depths.

We spoke in the question time last week about the abyss. A place where the worst of evil was believed to be imprisoned.

Somehow the Abyss is opened and evil is released. In a way, this is so evil can show its true self in order to be fully dealt with.

But it sure is a terrifying thought.

And these super locusts – scorpio locusts….an inspiration for the movie aliens maybe.

Now some people have tried to locate the meaning of the these locusts with modern analogies – they are attack helicopters etc. But this is a 1st century text. And we need to interpret it accordingly.

Locusts were bad enough. A plague of locusts were a nightmare in themselves. A good plague could eat everything in sight for 100’s of miles. Leaving the inhabitants tortured by starvation for the next few months. Often 5 months at least before the next crop. These ones seem intent on human torture itself.

1. Then again in vs 16-19 we see another heard and saw. Heard troops 10000X10000 but what he saw was even more frightening. Lion headed horses breathing sulfur and fire with snake tails.

It sounds like we are building to a battle.

There is a temptation to think that this and the other warlike images are prophetic utterances that must be fulfilled if Jesus is going to come back. But when Jesus talks about wars and rumours of wars he is making a general observation about the way of the world. About selfishness and power and violence and taking by force.

Fear of an invading enemy is something that to a greater and lesser extent has filled the minds of many people down through time.

Weren’t the 90’s lovely. The Soviet Union had fallen and we hadn’t yet discovered the hatred and violence of the radical Islamist. But throughout human history the threat of an invading army; the scorched earth; the destruction of property; the theft of belongings; the rape; captivity; slavery and murder loom large in the minds of many in all places and all times.

The problem is if we:

1. If we read this and believe Jesus is coming back with a sword to make war. Will be the Lion and not the lamb.
2. And if we believe that war in the Middle East is not only inevitable but desirable because it means Jesus is coming back.

These do weird things to Christian mindset. All of a sudden blessed are the peace makers becomes: I don’t know about peace makers. They might be getting on the road of God’s prophetic plan. Sorry What? Jesus nature. God! Has not changed.

The Euphrates was the promised border of the nation of Israel (though it probably never grew quite that large. It was also the border of the Roman Empire. If you lived in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Or in Judea for that matter. That was a fairly logical place for a military threat to come from. The last time Judea was invaded a generation before Jesus that was from that direction the invasion came from.

Remember these are not separate from the four horse of apocalypse or the other seals: War, power, violence, inequality. This is just a retelling.

It is as though John is systematically saying, ‘Think of your worst nightmares; now double them; and then imagine them coming true all at once, together. That’s what it’s going to be like. This is God’s way of letting evil do its worst, so that it may eventually fall under its own weight.’[[3]](#footnote-3)

13.But why? Why all this wonton destruction and fearful imagery of war and famine and torture?

**14.** Throughout the vision John wants his readers to know that God and the lamb remain sovereign, even though for evil to be finally conquered it has to be allowed to come out into the open and do its worst[[4]](#footnote-4)

And in the face of a military invasion we have seen mini revivals. People praying in fear a desperation perhaps but praying nevertheless.

So the natural disasters and evil spiritual horrors and famines and military disasters still exist and are a call for repentance.

And yet in Chapter 9 the people resist favouring idolatry and sin.

The final verses of chapter 9 indicate well enough the shape of John’s understanding of the basic human plight. Like all mainline Jews of his day, he believed that human evil emerged from idolatry. You become like what you worship: so, if you worship that which is not God, you become something other than the image-bearing human being you were meant and made to be. Thus verses 20 and 21 stand in parallel. Worship idols—blind, deaf, lifeless things—and you become blind, deaf and lifeless yourself. Murder, magic, fornication and theft are all forms of blindness, deafness and deadliness, snatching at the quick fix for gain, power or pleasure while forfeiting another bit of genuine humanness. **Repentance** is more than just expressing regret for a few misdemeanors. It is a radical, heartfelt, gut-wrenching turning away from the idols which promise delight but provide death. God longs for that kind of repentance. He will do anything, it seems, to coax it out of his rebellious but still image-bearing creatures.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**15. Chapter 10**

John is offered the little scroll. It is not small as in physically smaller but small as in it is a condensed version of the story we have already been told.

**16.Natural and supernatural evil, human induced and that which is inflicted upon humans will happen. Some will repent. Some will not. But the faithful will be able to stand even if some lose their life in the midst. So hold on to Jesus.**

When God speaks something creative happens. The world was spoken into being. And when John speaks the words of the prophesy, when he speaks God’s words something similar happens.

God’s words are to become John’s words in order that they may become reality[[6]](#footnote-6)

The words of God are sweet but the message is bitter. Now all this is taking place while we are waiting for the 7th trumpet to be blown. But we are told in vs 6 that when that happens time will have run out for people and in vs 7 that then the mystery of God will be completed…..so be patient.

17.Chapter 11

I would have to say that the book of Revelation is a little confusing and of all it’s difficult chapters chapter 11 is among the most difficult.

John’s prophesy is about measuring the temple and about 2 witnesses.

Now almost everyone who has a commentary on this has a theory about what this is about.

1st I suspect that John is not measuring the temple in Jerusalem but the heavenly throne room. This has echoes in Ezekial 40 and Zechariah 2. The followers of Jesus had come to see themselves as the true temple, the place where God now lived through his powerful **spirit**. John is commanded to mark out this community so that, as in chapter 7, it may be protected against ultimate harm[[7]](#footnote-7)

But the outer court will remain vulnerable. The faithful on Earth perhaps?

Now if 7 is the number of completion, all time. 3.5 years is half that time. This is all symbolic somehow.

18. The two witnesses who do miraculous wonders and proclaim God’s words have variously been seen as Moses and Elijah; The Eastern and Western Church; Israel and the Church; The witnessing Church just as Jesus sent out his disciples 2 by 2.

And in a way so they are in or of the same kind as Moses and Elijah; performing miracles and driving the unbelievers and gentile nations around them mad. But at the climax of their work will be their martyr-death at the hands of ‘the monster that comes up from the Abyss[[8]](#footnote-8)

We learn more about these monsters next week.

But these witnesses are described as olive trees and lamp stands. Now the Olive tree could refer to Israel – the symbol of Israel. But also in the Jewish imagination the Tree of Life is an Olive Tree.[[9]](#footnote-9) And the churches are described as lampstands.

So most likely interpretation of this passage is that the witnesses are in fact the faithful and powerful witness of the church about the hope and life of Christ even unto death.

The God-given and God-protected vocation to bear faithful prophetic witness will not mean that one will be spared from suffering and death, but rather that this suffering and death itself, like that of the Jesus whom the church worships and follows, will be the ultimate prophetic sign through which the world will be brought to glorify God.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The message of this whole section; which is a second retell of the seals; is that even through natural disasters; even though there is supernatural evil that oppose and inflict suffering; even with the threat violence and military power.

*The martyr-witness of the church*…, *will succeed where the plagues have failed*. This is how the nations will come to glorify their creator. This is how ‘the kingdom of the world’ will become the **kingdom** of ‘our Lord and his **Messiah**’—[[11]](#footnote-11)

During our time on earth, we may find that we face many trials. Suffering, torture, even martyrdom.

But God is faithful and true. He can if he wishes resurrect us. Indeed, he will at the end of time. Our sure and certain hope.

The encouragement is that by the power of the Holy Spirit we can faithfully witness to God’s goodness. We can be like the church of Laodicea was not and have a mission warm healing water and cold refreshing streams. Healing, power and faithfulness is what in times of suffering and trial, our world needs most and is what will call them back to himself.

Suddenly, out of the smoke and fire of the earlier chapters, a vision is emerging: a vision of the creator God as the God of mercy, grieving over the rebellion and corruption of the world but determined to rescue and restore it, and doing so through the faithful death of the lamb and, now, through the faithful death of the lamb’s prophetic followers.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This is no different from Jeremiah who in the midst of military defeat and slavery and deportation God says: For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Maybe our response needs to be the same as the Elders in heaven and worship the one who is and was because the future has now arrived in the present.

19. Reflect

1. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re8.6-13&off=3368&ctx=the+seas+and+so+on.+~He+was+talking+about), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 81–82. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re8.6-13&off=8233&ctx=+it+was+irrelevant.+~His+whole+book+is+ab), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re9.13-21&off=7846&ctx=+the+United+States.+~It+is+as+though+John), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 91–92. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re9.1-12&off=7202&ctx=rrible%2c+is+limited.+~Throughout+the+visio), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 87–88. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re9.13-21&off=8137&ctx=er+its+own+weight.%E2%80%99%0a~The+final+verses+of+), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re10.1-11&off=3701&ctx=how+prophecy+works.+~God%E2%80%99s+words+are+to+b), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re11.1-14&off=3700&ctx=+Christian+movement%E2%80%94~the+followers+of+Jes), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re11.1-14&off=6320&ctx=unding+unbelievers%2c+~but+that+the+climax+), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The tree of knowledge of good and evil is thought to be a fig tree. It brings new light on the occasion when Jesus curses the fig tree. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re11.1-14&off=6941&ctx=will+grasp%E2%80%94is+this.+~The+God-given+and+Go), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re11.1-14&off=8155&ctx=ent+turning+to+God.+~The+martyr-witness+o), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Tom Wright, [*Revelation for Everyone*](https://ref.ly/logosres/evry87rev?ref=Bible.Re11.1-14&off=9618&ctx=+are+to+be+rescued.+~Suddenly%2c+out+of+the), For Everyone Bible Study Guides (London; Louisville, KY: SPCK; Westminster John Knox, 2011), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)