

TERRORISTS AND TERRORISM

There are many tributes, many programs, many astute and knowledgeable people making important commentaries and reminding us of important principles on this tenth anniversary of the attack on our Way of Life. I have no special credentials, and I have nothing to say more important than what any of you might say. It just feels wrong to say nothing, as if we don't care or it doesn't matter to us.

Like Pearl Harbor, September 11th came upon us without warning or honor. Unlike Pearl Harbor, it did not come from another country, another nation. Horrendous as it was, we could go to war against the Empire of Japan. It is immensely difficult to go to war against smoke and mirrors – against individuals and small groups who hate us and wish to destroy us, but without any rules, any open justification, any identifiable authority or defensible purpose. “We don't like you, and we will keep trying to destroy you, and that's just the way it is.”

Dealing with terrorists and terrorism is a new way of life – we think. It really isn't, but there's no need to get into that maze right now. We are a country with stated goals and laws and values and systems. We do not work them well, in some instances, yet they are always at work. We refer constantly to our Constitution, though we do not all agree on what it means. We have an imperfect form of government, yet it *is* a form, and it constantly directs and redirects our choices. Among other things, it prevents us from responding to terrorists in ways that might be more effective because we are unwilling to suspend what we believe to be true about the importance of human life.

On the other hand, because of vast and intricate systems that support civilization in our time – providing electricity, water, computer networks for millions, etc. – it is easier to disrupt our vast and complex systems than it has ever been before. An oil pipeline or a water canal or a crucial power substation going down, and we are crippled dramatically. What about germs, and poison? What if it's the middle of winter? So what do we expect?

People raised to hate us from birth – with no morals, no values, no compassion we recognize – are watching and waiting and planning for some way to harm us. They hide on purpose, among people we think

are valuable, people we think have rights and meaning. But the terrorists do not think so, even if these “innocents” are their own people, even their own relatives. But our values prevent us from protecting ourselves if it means harming them. We are thankful for that, even if we are not always pleased about that.

What is our Way? “Love your enemies. Pray for them.” This does not mean siding with our enemies, but that’s another topic. God help us to stay faithful to what we believe – no matter how tempted we are to adopt the ways of our enemies. Of course, I have some friends who assure me that such an approach is stupid and naive and cannot possibly work against our enemies. Jesus, do we know nothing about You or Your story? We should abandon You because we think Your Way will not work here? All these years later and we know nothing about the Cross; nothing about being baptized; nothing about the Gospel; nothing about the story of the early church; nothing about the Book of Revelation? Your Way will not work, so we are going to recommend ... what?

One of the retreat participants brought a special American flag to show us at the recent Prayer Retreat in Omaha. It was a large flag, and on it – in the place where the stripes usually are – were written the names of those who died on September 11, 2001. Of course, behind each name, there are stories, families, hopes, dreams, faith, and love, all embodied in real people now gone.

They are all gone. We are bereft. We believe, of course, that God has them covered. That does not bring them back. I have often reminded you that it is a broken world. Today we are reminded that it is far more broken than we like to realize or remember. When we are separated and alienated from God, it is a greater tragedy than any of us want to know. Is it possible to be a terrorist without being alienated and separated from God? Is it possible to live a life in hatred or vengeance without being alienated and separated from God?

Once we know – once we see it clearly – reconciliation with God becomes the most urgent and the most important issue in all of life.

In any case, it is September 11, 2011, and we need to spend some time together in silence – in tribute, in sorrow, in gratitude, in rededication.

EXCERPTS FROM THE REVELATION
Part I – Comments from Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7

The Book of Revelation is the simplest and most complex book in the Bible. That is, I can tell you its message in one sentence: “Hang in, don’t compromise, and stay faithful to Jesus – even if it costs you your life.” But the message is set in the context of imagery and interwoven visions that stagger the mind and the imagination. Confusing matters even more, The Revelation has been and still is the favorite book of the worst end of Christian teachers and preachers. It is used on purpose to try to frighten people into being good. This doesn’t *make* anybody good, but it *does* frighten them. Unfortunately, people who are frightened and who believe it’s okay to frighten others are among the most dangerous and satanic on the planet. Fear is both the theoretical and the practical opposite of faith. The two are mortal enemies. Scripture’s own summation: “*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.*” (I John 4:18)

There are strong connections between the Book of Revelation and Dante’s *Inferno*. That is, most people link Revelation with divine punishment, the Lake of Fire, eternal punishment – an angry, vengeful God. Authors and preachers who play this theme often get rich and have huge followings – even though what they say is gibberish, and despite the fact that what they predict does not happen. Hal Lindsey, for instance (*The Late Great Planet Earth*), was a complete charlatan as a biblical scholar. His book made many predictions, all of which have now proved to be false. Yet the appetite for his kind of scare tactics is such that his reputation remains undimmed. Ditto to all the ignorant trash that has come out in *Left Behind* books and movies. Sales were off the charts. Money still rolls in. But somebody like me, who calmly tells you the real truth about the Book of Revelation – and who tells you that Revelation has not jumped track from the Gospel of God’s love to an entirely different message about a fiendish and diabolical God – I get no following large enough to notice, and no money other than what I was already getting for normal ministry. Of course in actual fact, that is a big favor, and I am truly grateful. Fame and fortune are fickle companions, and I have wanted little to do with either one of them for many years now. (I can still hear Jimmy Durante’s song in my head: “Fame, if you win it, comes and goes in a minute.” And his conclusion was: Forget the little crap and try to make somebody happy.)

EXCERPTS FROM THE REVELATION
PART I – COMMENTS FROM CHAPTERS 4, 5, 6, 7

We must begin with an honest disclaimer: This is not going to be a real study of the Book of Revelation. This is supposed to be Review & Renew – as in, a friendly little dip into various biblical passages. So today and again next week we will take just a little peek into a few chapters of Revelation. And right now, hopefully, a very brief introduction will help us get oriented. If you begin to read and ponder the Book of Revelation on your own, especially the early chapters, you will get more out of these two sermons. But that is entirely up to you.

The Revelation was written about 90 A.D. (give or take ten years) by a Christian leader named John, probably a kind of Bishop of Asia – western Turkey to us, with Ephesus being the most prominent city of that region at the time. Somebody always wants to argue with me when I say that The Revelation was not written by the Apostle John (that is, the John who was one of the twelve disciples whom Jesus chose). Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely that the Apostle John was the author. If you feel we need to hear the arguments in favor of the Apostle John being the author, I promise you it will not impress me. But you might convince someone else. So if that is an important item for you, don't hesitate to come forward. We are Congregationalists – at least in theory.

In any case, the author is in exile on the Island of Patmos and has lots of time on his hands, but his concern for the churches and the Christians he knows has not diminished. Some Roman authorities got angry enough to banish him, but not angry enough to kill him. Big mistake! Huge! Up until the death of Paul (64 A.D. in my view), Christians of the New Testament period had been essentially respectful and even appreciative of the Roman Empire (with glaring exceptions, of course). Nobody likes everything about any empire, including our own. But things have reversed by the time The Revelation is written. Rome is now seen as the evil empire, satanic through and through. And all its emperors have gone over to “The Dark Side.”

Revelation is a book of sevens. 777 is the number of the Christ. 666 is the number of the anti-Christ. So the author will line out his book in a series of interlocking sevens:

Seven churches
Seven golden lamp stands
Seven stars (in his right hand)
Seven angels of the seven churches

Seven spirits of God (around the throne in 4:5)
SEVEN SEALS – guarding the great Scroll
Seven trumpets
Seven plagues
Seven bowls

Have I made the point yet? (42 months is 6 sevens; 1,260 days is 180 sevens; “a time, and times, and a half time”; 3.5 years is half of seven.) (Revelation 11:2; 12:6; 12:14; 13:5) John never gets tired of playing with sevens.

Remember, I’m not trying to be thorough. This is just a little “dip” into a few chapters to see if I can hook a little interest. Sometimes I do; sometimes I don’t. Or to be more accurate: I do with some; with others I don’t. And if you happen to be among those for whom I draw little interest, please do not think that puts you on my blacklist. I have some good friends who have no use for The Revelation. John Calvin and Martin Luther, among others. The Revelation only made it into the New Testament canon by the skin of its teeth. Actually, it was a trade-off: the eastern wing of Christendom wanted the Book of Hebrews in; the western wing wanted Revelation in. Guess what kind of a deal they cut.

Okay, here we go.

CHAPTER 4 – THE THRONE ROOM

Have you ever tried to picture the scene we find in chapter 4 at least a little? John’s imagery defies graphic arts, as many artists have proved over the years. But here we can get some hints. (Remember, we are only dipping a little – not being thorough.)

“One” is seated on the throne. Are we going to see God? No, just get some hints about glory.

Are jasper and carnelian impressive to you? Me either. But they are very impressive to John. A rainbow around the throne. That’s a little better. God of covenants – God of promises (and good ones). “I will not destroy the earth, I will transform it – almost beyond recognition, but still ...” (Genesis 9:8-17) (I do not hold with John’s cosmology, by the way. How about you? Is the earth still the center of the universe for you, and the only real estate available anywhere, period?)

Twenty-four elders – twelve tribes times twelve apostles. I like that. John, unlike a lot of Christians from his day to ours, does not believe that God will abandon all the promises and covenants made with Israel. Israel is Jacob, by the way – a person, not an amorphous conglomerate of nebulous humanity. But let's not get me started on that theme.

Seven torches, which are the seven spirits. (Is “before the throne” *inside* the circle of elders?) What about sevens? Seven moving lights; seven archangels; seven days in a week; the Sabbath is the seventh day, of course; seven rays; and so on.

Four living creatures – fixed signs of the zodiac; four corners; four winds. The stability (and reality) of creation. Stuff put into hard-core physical reality. The four creatures see all, inside and out. They can move in any direction. Where are they in relationship to the elders and the spirits?

Handel choruses ring throughout Revelation. Many miss them because of the other imagery going on. But Revelation has inspired more great church music than any other book in the Bible by far. Okay, enough from chapter 4 – meaning, hopefully enough to get you to go read and ponder it for yourself.

CHAPTER 5 – THE LAMB

This chapter alone is “worth the price of the book,” as we sometimes say. One of the most remarkable scenes in any literature, anywhere.

There is a scroll. We are in heaven. (With John, it's hard to keep track of where we are.) The ancient formula was: “As above – so below.” There is nothing on earth that does not have its “perfect” counterpart in heaven. So this is “The Great Scroll.” That is, it contains “what God has written” about all that is and is to come. The entire destiny of the universe, so to speak, is written on this scroll. But it is sealed. That is, all history and destiny are on hold – paused. God does not dare allow the scroll to be opened until some Being is worthy enough to open it without ruining everything, without letting everything come to ruin. So the plan is good. Not bad. Not evil. Wondrously good. It is therefore far too good to risk losing. Therefore God will not allow the scroll to be opened – will not allow the destiny of creation to unfold any further – until One is found who is worthy to lead us into our true and rightful

purpose. Does any of that sink in? If so, you are probably starting to pick up pieces of what John is saying.

And by the way, may we skip to verse 13 in chapter 5 for just a moment? *“I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’”* (ESV)

It is just one of the many places in Revelation which show that John’s expectations are, at worst, inconsistent. But at best, they are far closer to ideas of universal salvation than they are to notions of widespread damnation, judgment, or punishment. Every creature in heaven and on earth is worshipful. Why doesn’t the whole Christian world start saying to every fundamentalist, literalist, fear-monger, *Left Behind* advocate: “What about chapter 5, verse 13?” “But how do you explain chapter 5, verse 13?” “Okay, but what about chapter 5, verse 13?” “You are the one who keeps saying we should accept the Bible as the absolute word of God. You are the one who claims there are no errors in it! WHAT ABOUT CHAPTER 5, VERSE 13?”

But we don’t want to stop there. In Chapter 5 we get the great double take. John is about to give up in utter despair because no one is worthy to open the scroll. And indeed, he cannot imagine that anyone will ever be found great enough to open this scroll. It is beyond belief that such a One exists – “in heaven, on earth, or under the earth.” So he begins to weep uncontrollably. The destiny of all things is put “on hold” forever. All meaningful process and progress are frozen. We can go through our days but we cannot get anywhere; we are only treading water. Sometimes we do indeed feel that way. It is not hard to understand why he is weeping.

Then John learns, in amazement, that there is One worthy to break the seals. The great Lion of the tribe of Judah is able to break the seals and open the scroll. So we look to see the great Lion of Judah, the root of David – the conqueror. (Why root? Why not branch? *“The Lord said to my lord ...”*)

But as the mist and fog clear away, we see standing there not a lion, but a lamb – with the marks of slaughter on it (as though it has been slain). Actually, the word used is “lambkin” – *arnion*. Then back to layers of Handel-like choruses. “Worthy is the Lamb,” etc. PLEASE NOTE: Revelation will never go back to Lion (the usual style of conquerors and victorious leaders, from a human perspective). Most preachers and teachers who talk about The Revelation go back to Lion. But the Book of Revelation never goes back to Lion! The One who is worthy will always be and remain the Lamb – the Lamb with the marks of slaughter on it. The Lamb will conquer by the sacrifice of love – never by coercion or what we call “might.” It will always be by the power of love. The Lamb will win our hearts – reconcile us – change us from within. And though most of Christendom cannot remember this, Revelation will never forget it.

John will keep playing on this imagery to the unspeakable delight of a few of us. The great battle (as in a boxing ring) is set before us: “In this corner – weighing only a few ounces, with no weapons we can see, clothed only in the blood of His own wounds – stands Arnion, the helpless lambkin, who has already been defeated, as far as this world is concerned. And in this other corner stands Therion, the Beast – huge beyond description, weighing untold thousands of pounds, with armor and armaments beyond anything the world has ever known (which was true of the Roman Empire).” Arnion versus Therion. (Bambi versus Godzilla.) Guess who is going to win? John keeps teasing us: Guess who is going to win! And of course, John is saying, “The world has no idea how powerful the love of Christ is.” The legions of Rome, with the finest steel and armor and training and equipment the world has ever seen, will indeed march against the Christ and the helpless followers of His church. And they will be determined to exterminate the Christians and erase the Christian Faith from the earth. But in this obviously hopeless and unequal battle, the truth is – and ever shall be – that Christ will convert and win over Romans faster than Romans can kill Christians. It is one of the greatest surprises in all history. Why doesn’t Christ still have this kind of power? You think He doesn’t? Give Him a few truly faithful followers and see what happens.

A few more tiny little comments (at least in comparison to the “Arnion versus Therion” mindblower):

CHAPTER 6 – THE FOUR HORSEMEN OF THE APOCALYPSE

The four horsemen always ride. They always have and they always will – in this temporal, physical world. They represent the realities of a fallen (broken) and imperfect realm. Death (the fourth horseman, on the pale horse) is always coming for some of us. It never stops. None of us escape.

Sometimes we have economic struggles – recession, depression, famine. The third horseman (on the black horse) has been riding harder than usual, of late. One of the four always seems to be in the lead – for a while. Inflation is one of the specialties of the third horseman. (*“A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius.”* A day’s wage doesn’t buy what it used to. But do not harm the oil or wine. You don’t get to die that easily. You don’t even get to starve to death in any quick or merciful fashion. You just get to eke out a living, as one day drags into another day and all quality of life has gone.)

But I really wanted to mention the first two horsemen.

The white horse represents the “war”: the great war of good against evil; the huge efforts and battles waged by “the good guys.” King David. King Arthur. The Lone Ranger. Harry Potter. Luke Skywalker. Obi-Wan Kenobi. Whoever your heroes are (in any field), they ride the white horse. They fight to make a better world. They are noble and courageous. But lots of people still suffer and die in the battles they fight and in the wake of their struggles. They die in a good cause, and we honor them. Nevertheless, the white horse and its rider still bring much suffering and loss. When King Arthur, King David, Luke Skywalker, Gandalf, or Aragorn go into battle, many people are still slaughtered. I honor Moses as one of the greatest men who ever lived. But he also ordered genocide for those who threatened the Covenant People. I cannot even put into words how much I admire and respect Abraham Lincoln. But the slaughter of the war he fought was horrendous. In any case, the white horse and its rider represent the good guys who fight for the right (the good cause) and try to build a better world out of the fray.

The red horse represents the “war” and the severe carnage of the bad guys. Stalin. Hitler. Whoever you think of as being “in it” for power, for wealth, or for personal gain without any real intention of serving or worshipping God. They ride the red horse.

But as every Christian needs to know and remember: The good guys and the bad guys are both “outside the kingdom.” Only those who serve and obey Christ (the Holy Spirit) are truly followers of Jesus. “Turn will and life over ...” My own way and my own will can never make it. *Thy* will be done, down to our smallest decisions, on a daily – hourly – basis. It is the great misunderstanding of literally hundreds of thousands of Christians: The church is not about “good versus evil.” We are not Christians because we want to *be* good or try to *do* good. And we are not converted when we change from evil ways and start to be nice or caring or more loving. We are converted when we turn our wills and our lives over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit – when we switch allegiance to a new and very different KING. Christians know they are not good enough or smart enough to run anything by their own best motives or by their own best light. We need a Savior. We cannot *will* to do the good. But we can turn our wills over to a higher Being. And, one day at a time, we can more and more learn to let the Holy Spirit guide and control our choices, our purposes, our methods, our desires, our very lives ... down to the level of each and every day of our journey here.

CHAPTER 7 – WHO WILL BE SAVED?

Back for a minute to John’s true perspective on who will be saved. Jesus is the Savior. And Jesus is very good at what He does! So the lore, for many, is that only 144,000 will be saved. (Jehovah’s Witnesses, to this day, believe this. Many Seventh-Day Adventists believe it as well.) But 144,000 is not very many if we have over six billion people on earth, and that doesn’t count all the previous generations.

Twelve times twelve – carried to the thousandth power – is probably closer to what John was trying to hint at. In John’s day, there were only Roman numerals, and few folk could work very much math with them. Before Arabic numerals came into play (600 A.D.), numbers were mostly symbolic and often represented a guess more than something precise, as we think math should be. Before we feel entirely superior, we need also to remember that at least their numbers had meanings and were not mere digits, as they most often are today.

Twelve thousand from every tribe – that is, twelve thousand for each of the twelve tribes of Israel – but what about the twenty-four elders? John thinks nobody will be saved beyond the Jews? That’s crazy. John

never said or meant or implied what so many have claimed in his name. Listen to him! Revelation 7:9:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes and with palm branches in their hands.” (Palm Sunday done over again, and finally done right.) (Then more Handel choruses.) There is no mistaking it: They are clothed in white robes. They are “in.” And they are beyond counting. Beyond comprehension. They are not a literal 144,000; they are twelve by twelve carried to the thousandth power. In short, *more* than we can imagine or conceive of. Once again, the meaning of The Revelation is reversed from the usual understanding and proclamation. Who will be saved? Just about everybody! At least very nearly everybody.

CLOSING STATEMENT

This has been a tiny but fascinating dip into the mind of John and the book that he wrote. It is not a departure from the Gospel – it is not a contradiction to the God of love that Jesus came to reveal to us. It is easy to get careless and use the imagery of John to support the attitudes and opinions we had all along – that we held long before Jesus came to us. But that is not okay. If we hear and use the closing book of the Bible to return us to the places and opinions we held before Jesus ever came, then what good is the Incarnation? What good is His coming?

But in actual fact, the Book of Revelation is far more disturbing than that. It calls us to abandon all our former goals and methods and opinions. To come with the Christ will transform everything about our lives – including what we hope for, what we care about, and how we try to achieve any and every goal we ever have. Never again can we follow the Lion – not anywhere in life. We follow the Lamb, with the marks of slaughter on Him. As it says at the very tail end (21:5) of the Book of Revelation: *“Behold, I am making all things new.”*