

Day 357

The Letter to the Hebrews

Hebrews 1.1-6.12

The letter to the Hebrews is something of an enigma among the New Testament writings, in that, unlike other letters it does not have a clear declaration at the beginning of the writer. Indeed, it does not at first read like an epistle, having no note of addressees, either. Traditionally, it was connected with Paul, and is quite Pauline in its content. Yet it is most likely that it was composed after Paul's death, while Timothy is still alive, released from detention and referred to as 'our brother' in chapter 13; the date would therefore be late 60sAD, before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70AD. Suggestions for its author have ascribed it to Luke, Barnabas or Apollos, but in reality, we must just refer to him just as 'the writer to the Hebrews.' The place of writing seems to be somewhere on the Italian peninsular, from the closing salutation sent from those in Italy. Possibly the setting is Rome.

The letter is speaking to Jewish believers, primarily, harmonising the faith of their fathers with the revelation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The letter follows the pattern of doctrinal teaching, followed by practical outworking in the last chapters.

Hebs.1.1-3 The writer is immediately into the content of the letter, with no greeting or introduction, unpacking the nature of Jesus Christ, and establishing His unrivalled supremacy.

While God spoke long ago (Greek *πάλαι pálai* –from which English *palaeontology*, study of ancient remains,) through prophets in recent times he has spoken through a son, different in nature to them. This son inherits all things from the father, by the right of primogeniture, since he has been implicated also in the creation of everything, a reference to Christ's pre-existence. This son is the radiance, the effulgence, the breaking out (Greek *ἀπαύγασμα apávghasma* = shining out,) of the glory of God and the imprint, the diecast image (Greek *χαρακτήρ charákteer*, such as the image of the sovereign's head on a coin,) of God's essential substance (Greek *ὑπόστασις ypóstasis*, literally, *sub-standing*), who by His expressed word (Greek *ῥήμα rhéema*) carries and sustains everything, now that He has cleansed the corruption of sin and sat down at God's majestic throne.

This expansive statement of Christ's nature is vast in its scope, implicating Jesus in the creation, in the Godhead and in the continued maintenance of all reality. It is clear that the writer sees His supremacy as unchallenged by any other being.

Hebs.1.4 – 14 In case there are suggestions that Jesus is in fact an angelic being, the writer shows from the Scriptures that the Son of God has been given a place which actually entitles Him to the worship of the angels (Deut.32.43 – a reading found in some ancient manuscripts and in the Septuagint Greek OT), a place of the closest possible relationship with God, an eternal Father-Son bond which cannot be ended.

The angels, on the other hand, are servants of God who carry out His will towards the heirs of God's rescue.

Hebs.2.1-4 For this reason of His supremacy, His word must be paid much closer attention than that of angels (in particular, the *Torah*, which was popularly ascribed to angelic revelation.) If the administration of the angel-mediated law entails retribution, even more weight attaches to this rescue covenant which is mediated by God Himself in Christ, attended as it is by the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit confirming Christ's word.

Hebs.2.5-8a Quoting Psalm 8, the writer demonstrates that although the son of man was made, for a short while, 'lower than the angels' (the original Hebrew has, 'than divine beings', while LXX has 'angels'), He is now exalted to a place where *all things* are now subject to Him, without exception.

Hebs.2.8b-13 Yet not everything is yet subjected to Christ – that is in process. But He has received the crown of glory because of His substitutionary death on the cross, because of God's covenanted intention. This was part of God's plan, so that Jesus could experience all that human beings go through, so that He would be fully qualified to be our brother as well as our Lord.

Hebs.2.14-18 By participating in full humanity, including death, and then by rising again from the dead, Jesus demonstrates to mankind, gripped in the terror of approaching death, that the devil's power is broken. This is not done for the benefit of angels, but mankind, in particular the descendants of Abraham to which the promise of blessing has been made. Now Jesus is the perfect, empathetic and compassionate high priest before the throne of God, because he has been tried and tested as a man, and through His suffering, has proven Himself a worthy representative. He is now able also to help the suffering people because He knows what it is like, and to remove the sin which has separated us from God.

Hebs.3.1-6 The writer urges his siblings in Christ to get to grips in their mind (Greek κατανοέω *katanoéo*, to fully grasp with the *nous*, the mind) who is both emissary (Greek ἀποστολος *apóstolos*) from and High Priest (Greek ἀρχιερεύς *arch-ierévs*) to God the Father for us. Because of this, being God's Son, Jesus is placed in a higher position than Moses, since the Son orders the home, whereas Moses is a steward of it. (Greek θεράπων *therápon* – an attendant, not a slave though.) Moses is therefore a servant, while Jesus is the Son, in whose house we dwell.

Hebs.3.7-11 The readers are encouraged not to repeat the unbelief of Israel under Moses, when they refused to enter the promised land God had prepared for them, quoting from Psalm 95.7-11.

Hebs. 3.12-15 For this purpose, we are also given to one another, to encourage each other to stay faithful as we wait for Christ.

Hebs.3.16-19 For those who were with Moses were not inexperienced in the mighty work of God, yet they totally lost the plot, and ended up dead in the desert because of their non-faith (Greek ἀπιστία *apistía*.)

Hebs.4.1 – 5 For believers in Christ, there is still the open door into God's rest, into His 'homeland'.

The word for rest in the Greek is *katápausis* (Greek κατάπαυσις), a total repose. It is taken from the Septuagint of Psalm 95.11 which in turn translates the Hebrew concept of

Menuchah (Heb. מְנוּחָה from root *manoach*, to repose, to dwell safely.) There is a sense not just of ceasing labour, but of safety. It is the idea of home, or homeland, which the writer here says is still available to us if we will not harden our hearts, but enter.

When this invitation is combined with trusting acceptance of Jesus' word, we enter into God's homeland. This rest is like God's sitting back when all of creation was finished, on the seventh day, enjoying all He had made.

Hebs. 4.6-10 Thus the invitation is to come into this home, this place of safety and total repose. It was not fulfilled through Joshua's leading the people into the land of Israel, for God speaks later of another day to come. This means there is still a 'state of Sabbath' open to God's people (v.9 Greek σαββατισμὸς *Sabbatismós*, a 'Sabbatism') which has not yet been completely appropriated.

Hebs.4.11-13 One of the few things Scripture instructs us to strive to do is to enter this 'homeland' of rest, of ceasing from strife! The warning here is that it is possible to miss it through disobedience. For God's purpose, His word (Greek λόγος *lóghos*) is incisive, like a sharp sword, and discerns the true motives of the heart, whether they are hard or soft.

Hebs.4.14-16 The good news is that we have a great representative now at God's throne, who has preceded us into the unseen realm. He knows our needs and our weaknesses, thus we don't need to be afraid of approaching Him.

Hebs.5.1-3 The High Priests of Israel are human beings, whose service is to bring sacrifice and offerings to God. Because of this they understand the human condition, and for this reason, the *Torah* lays down elaborate sacrificial rites to cleanse the sins of the priest before that of the people. (Lev.16.6)

Hebs.5.4-10 The High Priest cannot select himself, but must be called. Jesus has been called by the Father, as His Son, to His priesthood. This however is not in the line of the Aaronic priesthood, but in the line of a more ancient priesthood, that of Melchizedek.

This priesthood points back to Melchizedek, (his name means *my King is righteous*), priest of Salem in Gen.14, to whom Abraham, even before the covenant with God brought offerings and received his blessing. Because Jesus has submitted to human suffering, in obedience to His Father, learning by experience and through prayer what it is to be a human being, and what it is to go through pain, loss and rejection, God has given Him a priesthood which is in a category of its own.

Hebs 5.11-14 The writer seems to pause at this point in his material, perhaps thinking that he is expecting a lot of his audience, who are not the quickest on the uptake, in his experience. They have been on this Way a long time, but are still going over the basics. He would like to move them on and take them deeper – in fact, they should by now be training others in these things. He wants to take them further than they can go just now.

Hebs.6.1-3 He wants to leave behind the ABC of faith in Christ, not going over the old ground of the need for baptism, receiving the Spirit by laying on of hands, the reality of the resurrection to come and the certainty of an evaluation of our lives to come – with God's help, they will move on.

Hebs.6.4-8 The writer warns that it is impossible to come back from a fall if these things are not built into lives that have experienced the reality and experience of the living God through the Holy Spirit; it is as though they are making Jesus go through the cross all over again. If the fruit being produced by the readers' lives is not good, they will not make it to God's homeland.

Heb.6.9-12 However, the readers are offered hope – the writer does not have this in mind for them. Their fruit is wholesome, demonstrated in love and practical aid to people. He just urges them to keep going in this vein until the end, not giving up but persevering to the fulfilment of God's promise.

Day 358

The Letter to the Hebrews – The Covenant in Christ

Hebrews 6.13 – 10.18

Hebs 6.13-20 Looking back to the outset of this process of which Jesus is the culmination, the writer to the Hebrews recalls that, as well as a covenant, a *berit*, God also confirmed the promise by an oath (Greek ὄρκος *órkos*). There is no greater reference point for God to vow to than Himself, and thus He has confirmed the covenant by the most powerful presence in the universe. Thus we have a double confirmation, there are two unchangeable things which we can hold on to for our outrageous hope – His covenant, but also His oath. Because of this, we are anchored into the presence of the living God, beyond the veil of the temple, which was torn in two at His death, by Jesus Christ our eternal intercessor.

Hebs.7.1-3 The writer goes on to explore more of the implications of the priest of Salem, Melchizedek – more on whom is found in Genesis 14.18ff. He explains that Abraham gave him a tithe of his spoils from the battle with the five kings of the region. Melchizedek's titles are 'king of righteousness' and 'king of peace', and by legend he was unborn and undying, with an eternal priesthood just like God's Son, although this claim is found nowhere in the story in Genesis itself.

Hebs.7.4-10 However, in giving a tithe to this mysterious priest, Abraham was acknowledging the esteem in which his priesthood was held, and, since Levi was in a sense 'in Abraham' when Abraham gave his gift to Melchizedek, Levi's Aaronic priesthood is paying homage to a higher priesthood in Melchizedek, one which symbolises heaven itself and the intercession of Jesus.

Heb.7.11-19 The fact that Jesus is of another order of priest, that of Melchizedek, according to Psalm 110.4, means that His priesthood has superceded the Levitical priesthood. In Jesus, God has changed the basis for priesthood, since Jesus isn't even descended from Levi. The basis has become 'the power of His indestructible life' (Greek

κατὰ δύναμιν ζωῆς ἀκαταλύτου *katá dhýnamin zoées akatalýtou* – the last word, *akatalýtos*, meaning indissoluble, not able to be broken up,) rather than a line of descent.

Therefore, the priesthood of Aaron is obsolete, now the perfect has come.

Heb.7.20-22 Jesus has a priesthood which is also confirmed by God's own vow in Psalm 110.4, which makes a cast-iron guarantee of its efficacy, unlike the old, provisional priesthood.

Heb.7.23-25 Because Jesus cannot die, his office is eternal, and moreover, in His risen, undying state, He is the go-between, constantly bringing us before the Father's face, through the wounds in His hands, feet and side.

Heb.7.26-28 Jesus is the perfect high priest, never dying, perfect in His sacrifice, which does not need to be repeated. What He has done has been done once and is enough for everyone who ever lives or has lived. This is why God has vowed to Jesus the credentials of His priesthood are immortal.

Heb.8.1-5 Jesus, then, ministers in the very presence of His Father, not serving according to the old pattern of Aaron's priesthood, which is continuing in the Temple in Jerusalem (but shortly to be curtailed by the Temple's destruction,) but having His own blood, His own wounds to offer to the Father because of His once-for-all death.

In fact, the place of Israel's worship on earth, the Tabernacle first, then the Temple are just copies of the place in which Jesus is serving in the unseen realm, which is why God was so insistent to Moses in the detail of the Tabernacle and its proportions – it was a mirror of heaven!

Heb.8.6-7 Jesus, however, is in the actual place of encounter with God, and therefore supercedes the old order, which was in need of upgrading.

Heb.8.8-13 To back up his statements, the writer to the Hebrews quotes extensively here from the prophet Jeremiah 31.31-34, concerning the making of a new covenant, not an external matter, but an inward reality written on hearts, not on stone, one in which God Himself will presence Himself among His people. In this dispensation, there would be no need of policing the covenant, for God Himself will be resident as the lawkeeper. With the coming of the new, the old is superceded, and will pass out of currency.

Heb.9.1-5 The writer gives the set-up of the holy place and the holy of holies in the tabernacle to his readers, as described in Exodus 25 to 27, although he does not go into the details. Interestingly, and not quite correctly, the incense altar is placed behind the veil with the ark in this description.

Heb.9.6-10 The writer highlights the fact that the high priest of Israel could enter the holy of holies only once a year with the blood of sacrifice for sins, showing that this arrangement was interim and provisional upon the coming of the permanent order. The offerings made in that interim place were not able to deal with the problem of human guilt, they could only be symbols in food and drink and washings of the permanent removal of guilt which was to come.

Heb.9.11-14 Now that Jesus has come, He has gone into a holy of holies which is unseen, the very presence of His Father, presenting not the blood and ashes of animals, but showing to the Father His own wounded hands, feet and side, the only man-made thing in heaven. By this, and the fact that His offering to the Father has been through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, He is able to change something in mankind internally, removing the burden of guilt

and renewing the very consciences of people by His provision, so that we can be free and unafraid to serve God.

Hebs.9.15-22 Jesus, then, is the executor of the New Covenant; it is in His power to carry out what the will of the Father is, on the basis of His own death. Jesus can do this, because He has died but is alive again. In a legal sense, Jesus is now able to apply the terms of the Father's will, because this covenant is sealed with His own blood, without which the past cannot be atoned for and removed. Where Moses applied the blood of the Old Covenant, Jesus' blood is the blood of the New Covenant.

Hebs.9.23-28 The writer emphasises the fact that Jesus is now in the presence of His Father, having been given once and for all on the cross, not needing to repeat the sacrifice of Calvary, which is sufficient for all time. Just as all men die once, Jesus has died once, but has been raised again, to be seen again in final redemption glory for those who believe.

Hebs.10.1-4 The writer emphasises the interim nature of the sacrifices of the Aaronic priests, which must be offered year after year, because they are unable to decisively deal with the problem. Instead of removing sin, these sacrifices just remind of it, recurring annually as they do, the blood of animals being unable to substitute finally for the blood of mankind.

Hebs.10.5-10 Quoting Psalm 40.6-8 in its Greek version from the Septuagint, Christ is presented as the one who removes the need for the animal sacrifices by the sacrifice of His own flesh. Even though the *Torah* required sacrifice, it is not what God was really looking for. In fulfilling God's will, Jesus has overwritten the Old Covenant by the New, which now makes all who come to Him uniquely His because of His suffering in the flesh.

Hebs.10.11-14 The Aaronic sacrifices continue daily (indicating that this letter was written before the destruction of the Temple in 70AD), but Jesus has *sat down* – His is a position of having finished the work, now waiting for the fulfilment of His Father's timing for the effect of His work to be achieved, which is to bring to full maturity (and to full complement) the company of those who have been made His alone through His death.

Hebs.10.15-18 The writer, quoting Jer.31.33 once more, shows from Scripture that when the Holy Spirit comes and is resident in the ones forgiven, when that covenant is engraved on the inward man, who is also forgiven, there is no more need for sacrifice, for sin has been decisively dealt with.

Day 359

A Cloud of Witnesses – Letter to the Hebrews concluded

Hebrews 10.19 – 13.22

Hebs.10.19 - 25 The exhortation to believers, in view of all that has gone before in the writer's thesis, in view of the confidence we have through Jesus' sacrifice to come into the very presence of the Father Himself, with Jesus there already interceding for us, is to draw near, to come close, with certainty and free from guilt, because of what God has done for us. 'O Come, all ye faithful..come and adore Him ' is the invitation to us.

One thing of note here; the ancient rite of covenant as demonstrated in Genesis 15 and referred to in Jeremiah 34.18 involved the dividing of the carcass of a sacrificial animal down the backbone, into two. In the case of Jesus Christ, who Himself has become our sacrifice, it was not His body *per se* which was divided, but the Temple veil, which here the author of the Hebrew letter says is *his flesh* – (Greek σαρξ *sarx*) this is torn in two at the moment of His death, giving us access into the Holy of Holies.

The outcome of this astounding action on God's part is for the believer to continue to the accomplishment, full weight (Greek πληροφορία *pleerophoria*, = full accomplishment) of faith with unswerving (Greek ἀκλινής *aklinées*, literally 'without incline', not wavering or going off-track) hope, because of the Lord's faithfulness, because of His *chesed* promises. This is not, however, a lone attempt, but is in company with the brotherhood of Christ, whom each one is called on to assist and encourage through personal exhortation and through gathered edification, the latter being specifically mentioned since some may be concluding that the gathering is not necessary.

Hebs.10.26-31 There a solemn warning from the writer that to live in a lifestyle of sin and failure once we know Christ is to invite retribution, since the access to God we have is only possible through the sacrifice of Jesus, which to abuse is to defy the New Covenant of God, an insult to the *Chesed*-grace of God mediated to us by the Holy Spirit. There is a sure evaluation and analysis of the life lived by every disciple of Jesus to come, and the outcome of that evaluation for a life lived in disobedience to the call of grace is only to be feared – 'it is a fearsome thing to fall into the hands of the living God,' says the writer.

Hebs.10.32-34 The readers are encouraged to remember their former zeal and commitment in the face of opposition, seeing through times of literal trial and persecution, knowing that a better inheritance was promised.

Hebs.10.35-39 They need to maintain their bold confidence (Greek παρρησία *parrheesía*) in the light of continuing attack. Those who push through in faith need to hold on to the promise of His coming again; pulling back is not an option, demonstrated from the prophet Habakkuk 2.3-4.

Examples of Faith

Hebs.11.1-3 Developing the theme of 'faithful faith' (Greek πίστις *pístis*, reflecting both the quality and persistence of trust and reliance in the object of belief,) the writer defines faith as the substance (Greek ὑπόστασις *ypóstasis* = that which undergirds, underlies) of things hoped for, and the proof (Greek ἔλεγχος *élenchos* from a verb meaning to rebuke or prove by showing, reproving) of what is not visible. In one sense, this seems impossible – to have proof for what is not seen, and to have material grounds for hope seems to be a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron – yet this is what the writer proposes, and now will continue to illustrate and develop his statement from the salvation history of Israel, the people of God.

The very understanding that the universe is the creation of God is an act of faith, that God made all that is out of nothing, a step of trust in His revelation. Faith therefore implicates us from the moment we encounter God and His engagement with the world.

Hebs.11.4-7 The readers are offered a number of examples of those whose faith is to be commended – Abel offering God the flock rather than the fruit, Enoch's so pleasing God that he was taken into God and Noah who put his faith into action by building the ark when rain had not even been heard of. Faith, trust in what God says, the writer asserts, is an essential element of relationship with God, and pleases Him.

Hebs.11.8-12 Attention is given in particular to Abraham, seen by followers of Jesus as the father of those who engage with God through faith rather than by blood descent from Israel. His trust in God's call leads him to travel to Canaan, living as a resident alien there. It also leads to the birth of the son of promise when it seems impossible, from whom the whole nation of Israel springs up.

Hebs.11.13 – 16 Those so far named have not seen the fulfilment, the consummation of God's purpose which is to come; they have only seen their part in the story. They are looking for 'another homeland', an unseen dwelling which transcends what they have on earth, and which God has made ready for them.

Hebs.11.17-19 Abraham's readiness to sacrifice Isaac demonstrates the old man's trust that God could even raise his son of promise from the dead, which in a way, is what happened when God spared him.

Hebs.11.20-22 The other patriarchs are looked to for their part in this story of faith, Jacob seeing into the future as he speaks prophetically over his sons, Joseph foretelling the restoration of Israel to Canaan which would be his final burial place.

Hebs.11.23-28 The figure of Moses comes into focus as his rescue through faith is shown, and his preparedness to be disgraced *for the sake of Christ*, which is a novel insight, since Moses did not live in Christ's time, yet the writer sees him as honouring Messiah in his life. Reliance on this hope carried Moses through the tests of the deliverance in Passover and the Exodus.

Hebs.11.29-31 Reliance on God takes the people of Israel over the supernatural bridge through the Sea of Reeds, into Jericho, and even rescues Rahab the harlot, who has no lineal right to covenant, but entrusts herself to the God of Israel, to her and her family's gain.

Hebs.11.32-38 The writer now only mentions the names of the heroes of faith through the centuries of the story, *right-wisdom* and kings, prophets and faithful women, seeing God's rescue in their lives, or His sustaining power to endure terrible suffering and hardship; the world, says the author, is not worthy of them.

Hebs.11.39-40 All of them are ensigns of faithful faith but the fulfilment, the accomplishment of their hope, the *plerophoria* referred to earlier has been delayed until the full complement of God's intention is reached, the full tally of His purpose arrived at and until the better part of the story was told, the New Covenant story.

Hebs.12.1-3 In view of this great galaxy of faithful men and women, the writer exhorts his readers to follow them, and let nothing stop them reaching the goal of faith, unhindered,

achieved by keeping Jesus in our sights, who Himself has lived the faithful life, enduring pain but now has received His crowning glory with the Father. Keeping Him in view sustains the believer when weariness sets in.

Hebs.12.4-6 The sufferings they face are only part of the formation of character, part of the training a father puts his children through to bring them to maturity, forming Christ in them. They are not to be treated as enemies, but as teachers.

Hebs.12.7-11 The ancient Job declares at one point ‘Shall we receive only good from the Lord, and not evil also?’ (Job 2.10), recognising that the full value of a life lived is not only in its pleasant experiences but also in its resourcefulness in adversity. The father not only pleases, but toughens and corrects his sons; without this, there is no real parenting. The discipline of God can be unpleasant, but increases the yieldedness, the holiness of his sons to His purpose in them, leading to straight character and the wholeness of peaceful *shalom*.

Hebs.12.12-17 Because of this, the readers need to take courage and move forward in a balanced understanding of the way they are on. This includes living peaceably with all and keeping in view their uniqueness to God in holiness. Bitterness and immorality have no place in that atmosphere, nor compromise with sin, which, as with Esau’s foolishness, leads to painful loss and brokenness.

Hebs.12.18-21 For the covenant believers in Messiah Jesus are sealed by is not like the Old Covenant, when God spoke to His people but was begged not to speak again, being refused when He sought to communicate with them; this is not Sinai we have come back to, the place of terror and fear.

Hebs.12.22-24 Rather, this is the unseen Zion, the dwelling place of God, surrounded by angelic hosts and the heirs with Jesus Christ in faith, with God the just *right-wiser* in the middle of it all, the blood of Jesus giving access to those He has made able to come in by their acquittal, the blood of the New Covenant.

Hebs.12.25-29 Such a privilege and access is indeed to be held with awe and trembling, since the first covenant came with such great implications for Israel, both for blessing and cursing, that this realm of God’s direct rule among His people is a place of great ‘shaking’, great testing. What is left, after the shaking, is the real Kingdom, the place of certain faith. God needs to be feared as the God who is fire, with both creative and destructive capabilities.

Hebs.13.1-3 Love of both brothers in Christ (Greek φιλαδελφία *philadelphía*) and of strangers (Greek φιλοξενία *philoxenía*) is encouraged by the writer, particularly the latter, as one never knows whom one is encountering when serving the stranger – they may be an angel in disguise! Those in prison and suffering need to be cared for with compassion.

Hebs.13.4 Marriage is to be held in high honour, but sexual incontinence will come under God’s *right-wising* judgement.

Hebs.13.5-6 Greed and avarice are no friends of faith and contentment, because they rob the believer of the joy of trust in and reliance on God as provider in all circumstances. This is backed up by texts from Deut.31.6 and Psalm 118.6-7.

Hebs.13.7-8 The leaders (Greek ἡγούμενοι *eeghouméni*, from which English *hegemony*-those in charge, those leading,) are to be looked to as models and examples of how to live, reckoned by the way their lives are turning out (Greek ἐκβασίς *ékbhasis*, outcome, exit.) What is positive should be imitated, given that any man has weaknesses as well as strengths— notice, it is their *faith* which needs to be imitated, not their *faults*. Leaders are not therefore here presented as demagogues who are to be blindly obeyed. There is to be an evaluation going on, but also a following of the good. The benchmark, of course, is Jesus Christ, the leader of all leaders, and however strong or fickle human leadership may be, it is not permanent; He, on the other hand, is unchanging in His example, past, present and future.

Hebs.13.9-10 It appears that the addressees may have been becoming embroiled in superficial religiosity connected with foods from the Temple. There is no issue here, says the writer, for our food is from a heavenly altar which is inaccessible to the practitioners of outward religion.

Hebs.13.11-14 While the blood of sacrifices under the old system was sprinkled in the holy of holies, the carcasses were burned away from the camp. Jesus was crucified outside the city of Jerusalem, and the call is to not be afraid to be outcast with Him, since there is no need for a permanent dwelling here on the old earth, in view of the community of the new heaven and earth which is to come.

Hebs.13.15-16 The sacrifices which really count now are the sacrifices of our praise to God which Jesus renders acceptable to the Father. The sacrifice of love shown to others is also an outflow of Christ's cross.

Hebs.13.17 The people of God have been given leadership by the Holy Spirit for their care and strengthening, and an evaluation will be required of them of their care and love in Jesus' Name to His people. Thus, the saints of God are exhorted to follow their leaders (Greek ἡγούμενοι *eegouméni*) so that this charge they have been given does not become a scourge and onerous burden to them, which will not bring the kind of leadership to the people which will be of help to them.

Hebs.13.18,19 In drawing to an end, the writer asks for prayer, to be reunited with his addressees shortly.

Hebs.13.20,21 An expansive blessing which echoes the themes and thrust of the whole letter is spoken over the recipients finally, calling on the God of peace who raised Jesus Christ, by virtue of His eternal covenant-sealing blood, to furnish them with everything they need for completing what God gives them to do, for His pleasure and reward.

Hebs.13.22-25 The writer considers he has written a brief letter, which perhaps conveys the nature of his love and desire towards them, and his desire to be heard by them and received in his directions. He refers to the release of Timothy, and the desire to make a personal visit to his readers together with Paul's protégé .

Greetings are sent to leaders and people alike, from the Italian believers, with a closing invocation of grace.

Day 360

The Letters of John the Beloved

1 John 1.1 – 3 John 14

The notes on First John are taken from a seminar given in 2006

Background to the Letter

The letter was very likely written late in John's life, perhaps from Ephesus around 90ad, and possibly in an atmosphere of growing challenges to sound Christian teaching from false doctrines which had assaulted the church. There is some dispute about whether the writer was the Apostle John, who wrote the Gospel, the beloved disciple of Jesus, but there is enough crossover in the themes and in the historical references to support the fact that it was He who penned this tract to the church. In fact, the opening of the letter is an echo of John's gospels opening words, 'in the beginning', with its reference to the Word of Life, made flesh. As with the Gospel which bears his name, John does not state his name at any point in his correspondence, out of the same modesty which causes him in the Gospel to describe himself as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved.'

This is not a normal letter, like a Pauline letter, with a greeting or a blessing, and in fact, no one apart from the Lord is actually named anywhere in the letter. However, it is clearly written from and to certain persons, so we can assume it is a letter in its intention.

Major Themes in John

Darkness/Light (1.5,1.6, 1.7, 2.8-11)

Love/hate and fear (2.5, 3.1-3, 3.11-18, 4.7-12, 4.16-21, 5.1-2)

God & His children/World (2.15-17, 4.4-6, 4.13-15, 5.21)

Truth/Lies and heresy (1.8,1.10, 2.4, 2.18, 2.20-23, 2.26-27, 3.19-24, 4.1-3, 5.6-11, 5.20)

Faith and Righteousness/Evil (2.13-14, 5.3-5, 5.14-15, 5.18-19)

Fellowship/separation (1.3, 1.6,1.7, 2.19)

Life, forgiveness/sin, death (1.1,1.2,1.9, 2.1, 1.2, 2.12, 3.4-10, 5.11-17)

John's Letter – the Ramblings of an Old Man?

For some commentators, John's repetitive and rambling organisation of his material has led to them to conclude that this letter is the disconnected but inspiring thoughts of an old man, put down at random. Baur has written of its "indefiniteness," a lack of "logical force," a "tone of childlike feebleness"; and Julicher says it shows an "absolute indifference to a strictly logical and harmoniously ascending development of ideas".

However Robert Law in his commentary published in 1909 in Edinburgh says of John's epistle,

' The word that, to my mind, might best describe St. John's mode of thinking and writing in this Epistle is "spiral." The course of thought does not move from point to point in a straight line. It is like a winding staircase always revolving around the same centre, always recurring to the same topics, but at a higher level. Or, to borrow a term from music, one might describe the method as contrapuntal. The Epistle works with a comparatively small number of themes, which are introduced many times, and are brought into every possible relation to one another. As some master-builder of music takes two or three melodious phrases and, introducing them in due order, repeating them, inverting them, skilfully interlacing them in diverse modes and keys, rears up from them an edifice of stately harmonies; so the Apostle

weaves together a few leading ideas into a majestic fugue in which unity of material and variety of tone and effect are wonderfully blended. And the clue to the structure of the Epistle will be found by tracing the introduction and reappearances of these leading themes.’

Challenges to the Church

For John, there is clearly a demarcation – between light and dark, love and hate, life and death; between God and His people and the world, between those who are with them and those who have separated from them. There is truth and there are lies, there is Christ and there is the antichrist.

It’s important that we understand why John is writing like this. The church in Ephesus was in a battle. A leading heretical teacher, by the name of Cerinthus was teaching that God could only be known by means of secret knowledge, Gnosis. From this Greek word, comes the word Gnostic – describing any sect who taught that salvation (or enlightenment, as they called it) was achievable by knowing those clandestine words and mysteries, linked to the names of angels. It looks from John’s writings as though Cerinthus and his followers had been part of the church in Ephesus, but now had gone out from them.

According to the early church Father, Irenaeus of Lyons, writing about 170ad, Cerinthus was an Egyptian Christian, probably a Jew, who had forsaken the church. There is a tradition that John would not even go to the thermae – the local bath-house – at the same time as Cerinthus, because of his heresy.

Gnostics taught also that matter was essentially evil; God did not have anything to do with it. The world, they said, had been made by a lesser emanation from God – the demiurge. Thus, the job of a Gnostic was to get out of the evil world to the secret path of God. Gnostics who called themselves Christians refused to believe that Jesus was really a man of flesh and blood, because God couldn’t sully Himself with flesh. They taught that Jesus only appeared like a man ; this was called Docetism, from the Greek word, dokeo, to appear. They also taught that those who had attained gnosis were above sin, and in fact, nothing they could do would affect their enlightened position. This meant some of the Gnostics got into immorality, because they didn’t believe the flesh mattered. They also made themselves into elitists, having nothing to do with lesser mortals, keeping themselves to themselves.

When we understand this background, we begin to see why John would write the way he did. We can also see why he is so black and white. The church is in a time of danger, and people need guidelines on how to stay away from error.

How We See God is The Anchor-point

First, the nature of God is a key. If we understand God, we will understand who we are. So John makes the bold statement in 1.5 that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. God is not a malevolent force, and He’s not a secretive, shadowy being. To know God is to know clarity, openness. And with that light goes truth – integrity, honesty. God is wysiwyg – what you see is what you get. This is seen in 5.6, the Spirit of God is the truth.

Secondly, and most importantly, John states at the outset (1.1) that God has made Himself known in Jesus, who is the Word of life, the Word of God. John has seen him, handled him,

leaned against him, seen him bleed on the cross. He is really man and really God. So all who deny his humanity and his incarnation are not from God (4.1-3)

Thirdly, the key quality of God is love; that is, unconditional, committed, open-hearted self-giving; it's *agápee*, totally outgoing and unselfish. So John's statement in 4.8 and 4.16 that God is love stands alongside the statement that God is light. From this we get a clear picture of the nature of John's God as opposed to the hidden, mysterious version of the Gnostics. And we see we are loved, lavishly and immensely – John's exclamation in 3.1-3, as well as the declarations of 3.16, 4.8-11, 4.15-19. In the light of this love, John will call us to let that love be expressed.

Knowing Who We Are

Progressing then from who God is, we look at who we are in Him. John is very clear about who does and doesn't belong to Christ, who does and who doesn't have God's life.

First, because God is light, it's those who walk in light and truth who are His – we see this in 1.6-7. Also, for the same reason, those who are God's do not habitually live in the darkness of sin, but live in the power of the Spirit. – see 2.1, 2.13, 2.17, 3.3, 3.7, 3.9, 3.21-24, 4.4-6, 5.2-5, 5.18-21. There is provision for the forgiveness of sin, because, unlike the Gnostics, John is aware that we do and will fall, but Jesus' blood is effective for all sin. (1.8-10, 2.1-2, 2.12, 4.10)

Secondly, because the key to this new life of the Spirit is knowing Jesus and who He really is, John makes it clear that we are in relationship with Him, and without Him we are lifeless and lost. This comes out clearly in 2.20-25, and in 4.1-3, and again in 4.14-15, and also in 5.1, 5.5, 5.10-12 and 5.20. That last reference is outstanding, because John here discloses that Jesus is 'the true God and life eternal'. How we relate to Jesus, then is key.

And thirdly, because the essential character of God is love, and because of His vast love for us, we are called to love one another as reflectors of that immense and amazing love, by which His children are recognised .

This is what John speaks to us in 2.9-11, in 3.11-14a, 3.16-18, 4.7, 4.11-12, 4.19-21, 5.16-17; in fact, he repeats himself over and over again. It is said of the apostle John that in his old age, when they carried him into the meetings in Ephesus, that he repeated the same message each time he spoke to them – '*love one another*'. When challenged about this, he said, '*it is enough if we do only this.*' Love for one another in the family of Christ is the natural follow-on of His love for us. Those who have experienced the grace and freedom in Christ will have no hesitation in loving others, practically, extravagantly. In fact, as we will go on to see, John doubts whether those who fail to love have really experienced the grace of God for themselves.

Spot the Difference

And thus, we come to look at those beyond the pale, those who are walking away from God, without Christ. How, John wants us to know, can we tell the difference? This was particularly relevant for a church where former friends had turned and walked out to follow strange new teachings.

First, because God is light, then, those in darkness are not His. Even if we claim to have fellowship with him, if we walk in the shadows, if we lack transparency and integrity, we are not His – this is seen in 1.6 . Similarly, if people say they are His but walk contrary to His will, in sin and destructive lifestyle, they are not of God. This comes out in 2.4, 2.15-17, 3.4-6, 3.8-10, 4.5-6, 5.19. Whoever does not live the walk can't be talking the talk, says John. We need to beware of those who make God inaccessible, who make Him hidden and weird. Paul talks about the mystery as being the worst kept secret in the universe! (Col 1.26,27) It is revealed and known, and God is now clearly known.

Secondly, we can spot those who are separated from God by how they respond to the revelation of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son of God. This is clear from what John says in 2.18-19, 2.22-23, 4.1-5, 5.10b, 5.12. To know God is to know Jesus as man and God; it is to accept Him and to trust in Him. Those who have the Son have life, those who do not have the Son , do not have life.

Thirdly, where the character of God as love is not manifest it is clear that God is not at work in lives. John brings this out in 2.9, 2.11, 3.10, 3.12-15, 4.8, 4.20, so that we know clearly that unlove or hate is a sure sign of disconnection from the Son of God who loved and gave Himself for us.

Love Not the World

On a number of occasions in his letter John uses the term 'the world' to sum up the kind of ungodliness we are meaning. (2.15-17, 3.1, 3.13, 3.17, 4.1, 4.3-5, 5.4-5, 5.19.) The word he uses is kosmos, which comes from a Greek word meaning to order; John is not meaning the created earth, which belongs to the Lord. But he is meaning the world order, the world system, which he ends up by saying is under the tyranny of the evil one (5.19). For John, we are in the world, but not controlled by it (4.17) and through our faith we are overcoming the pull of the system. (5.4) However, he does make clear that Jesus has come to save this system from itself and transform it through His death on the cross. (2.2, 4.9, 4.14)

Conclusion

John's aim from the outset is that we believe, that we participate in the fellowship which is between Father and Son , and that we stand clear of the deception which sees God as distant, which sees Jesus as a phantom, and from the unloving and elitist behaviour of Gnosticism.

2 John

The Second letter of John is possibly written around the same time as the first and third, around 90ad, making them some of the latest writings of the New Testament, with the Revelation.

2 Jn.1-3 John calls himself 'the Elder' (Greek 'Ο πρεσβύτερος *O Prebhýteros*, from which English 'presbyter') and addresses the 'chosen lady', (Greek ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία *eklektée kyría*) which could be either a Christian woman and her family, or could be a euphemism for a particular church and its members, unnamed to us, for their protection in times of trouble. He refers to those are part of 'the truth' (Greek ἡ ἀλήθεια *ee alétheia*) referring to Jesus Himself, whom John heard call Himself that in John 14.6.

The invocation of grace, mercy and peace is from God the Father and the Son upon all.

2 Jn. 4-6 John's theme again is *agape*, the self-giving love of God; though her children walk in truth, the most needful thing is love, echoing Paul's words of 1 Corinthians 13. Truth without love can be a blunt instrument, while love guides its careful application.

2 Jn.7-11 John's anxiety for her and her children is provoked by the number of Gnostic teachers who are denying Jesus' physical reality, because they say Jesus cannot have anything to do with evil matter. John knows this is a lie, for he has lived with the real and wholly material Christ who is also God. To fabricate specious doctrine is anti-God conduct, but anyone who keeps to the path laid down can be sure of being host in their lives to Father and Son. The lady or church is to guard against any false teachers and not entertain them at all, for to welcome such is to participate in their corrupt ways.

2 Jn.12 -13 This letter is just an urgent interim note, pending the emissary's personal coming to them. He doesn't want to use up more paper and ink (Greek *χάρτης και μέλαν* *chártees kai mélan*) but will speak more face to face.

2 Jn.13 John closes with greetings, either from the family of the believing sister, or the members of a related church.

3 John

This third letter highlights the issues of church discipline which arose as time progressed. John has issues with the leader of a church, Diotrephes, whose personality is getting in the way of Jesus' work. It is encouraging, in view of the nature of the modern church with its foibles and strife to see that this is nothing new in the life of God's people.

3 Jn. 1 In John's third letter, he again entitles himself 'the Elder' (Greek 'Ο πρεσβύτερος *O Prebhýteros*) but this time is writing to one, Gaius, a dear friend.

3 Jn.2-4 John is very personal in his communication to his friend, glad to hear of his good health, physical and spiritual. This is his joy, to hear that his spiritual offspring are prospering.

3 Jn.5-8 Gaius has evidently been hosting some travelling teachers or evangelists, known to John, but unknown to him. John commends his hospitality to these who come in the name of the Lord.

3 Jn.9-11 John has written a letter to the church which Gaius is a member of, but the leader Diotrephes, whose ego is out of control, (he is, in Greek *ὁ φιλοπρωτεύων* *o philoprotévon*, literally, *the lover of being first*) has rejected John's input and spoken maliciously of him and his associates, for which reason John will be having something serious to say when he comes to them. Diotrephes has also rejected the travelling ministries and forbidden others to welcome them also. This is to his shame. Gaius is therefore not to copy this man's example, which is ungodly and evil.

3 Jn.12 By contrast, John commends Demetrius to Gaius, since his example is clearly in Jesus' character; Gaius can trust John's commendation.

3 Jn.13 – 14 As with the second letter, John is wanting to say things personally rather than in written form. He closes with the peace and personal greetings.

Day 361

The Unveiling to John; Letters to Seven Churches

Revelation 1.1- 3.22

The book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse to John is an enigma, a mystery. Its name in Greek (ἀποκάλυψις *apokálypsis*) means ‘off with the cover’, and it is in the stream of similar prophetic books such as Daniel and Ezekiel, full of symbol and dream-like vision. It is also part of a strong tradition of Jewish apocalyptic writing, set down in the century before and after Christ, such as the *Book of Enoch* and *4 Ezra*. However, Revelation is strongly Christian. Commentators Preston and Hanson have said of it ‘The work of Christ is not so much a background..but is the centre. Nowhere in the New Testament is Jesus given higher honour than He is in Revelation.’

The author of the Revelation can safely be assumed to be John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, because of confirmation of this by sources as early as Justin Martyr around 136ad. The authority with which the writer speaks also conveys a sense of one who has a great length of experience.

The time of writing is late in the first century; John is old by now, and imprisoned on the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, off the south-west coast of what is today Turkey. It is a time of intense persecution under the Roman Emperor Domitian, and many Christians are dying for love of Jesus. This comes out in the book clearly, as John encourages the saints to look forward to the fulness of the Lord’s rule on earth and the restoration of all things to come, in spite of the oppression.

Many have attempted to systematise the book, and make it a chronological sequence of events, which is the imposition of modern historiography on a prophetic work. John is rather painting word pictures, capturing scenes from the story to guide and encourage the church who are holding out in terrible times for the resolution of their struggles. It is a great poem, without being in poetic form, and needs to be read as such. Where it does not make sense, time must not be spent trying to fit it into our boxes; we should simply stand in awe of God and look for the fulfilment Revelation promises.

Rev.1.1 – 3 It is to be noted first of all that John calls this, not *his* revelation, but the ‘revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ *Apokálypsis Iesóu Christóu*.) the first three words of the book in Greek. It is shown by God through a divine messenger (Greek ἄγγελος *ángelos*) to John as witness to the word of God (Greek ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ *o lóghos tou Theóu*) and to Jesus Christ, a reminder of the opening of his Gospel. He invokes a blessing on all who read the words of his prophecy, and who put it into action.

Rev.1.4-5a John greets the addressees of his work, the group of seven churches in the province of Asia, in western Turkey.



By tradition, John lived in Ephesus, and his supposed tomb can be visited there. He first writes letters to the churches in the surrounding region, dictated to him by the messenger of God who comes to him.

He wishes them grace and peace from God, whose seven spirits (or seven-fold Spirit) dwell before the throne of God. Here we come face to face with the numerology of John, which is very much in the apocalyptic vein. Taking three as the number of heaven, and four as the number of earth, seven is the sum of both, giving the number of God's presence pervading all. It is also an indivisible number, and often referred to as the number of completion, linked to the Sabbath and God's making it separate.

The grace is also from Jesus Christ, risen and the source or principal (Greek ἄρχων *árchon*) of the authority of kings in the earth.

Rev.1. 5b – 8 John breaks into a doxology of praise to Jesus, the one who loves us and the redeemer from sin, through which he has created His people to be the realm of His rule and priest for Him in the earth. His coming again is certain, at which all eyes will see Him, and the nations of the earth will realise their mistake in rejecting Him.

God is here described as the 'Alpha and Omega', the A and 'big O' which are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, the one whose existence out-exists every other being, and who has all power and rule, (Greek ὁ παντοκράτωρ *o pantokrátor*), the Almighty.

Rev.1.9 – 11 John places himself here on the island of Patmos, in exile because of his adherence to the Good News of Jesus. Patmos seems to have been a Roman prison colony, and punishment is suggested by the fact that in Rev.20.4, John refers to those beheaded 'for the witness of Jesus' under which circumstance he is here on the island.

The writer is 'in the Spirit', in a state of close, ecstatic experience with God on the Lord's day (Greek ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ *en tee kyriakée eeméra*, literally, 'on the Lordly day.' This could well refer to the first day of the week, which became associated with the Lord's supper (Greek κυριακόν δεῖπνον *kyriakón dhípnon*) or a reference to the Day of the Lord, foreseen by prophets of old, although the construction here is unusual to refer to that. In this entranced state, he hears a voice telling him to write on a scroll what he sees to be sent to the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.

Rev.1.12-18 John's vision of the Son of Man is closely comparable to Daniel's description in Daniel 10.5ff, and to Ezekiel's in Ez.1.26ff. The sight is overwhelming of this blazing figure carrying stars and speaking swords and waters, and John falls prostrate before Him. He reveals Himself to be the first and last, and the living One (Greek ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος καὶ ὁ ζῶν *o prótos kai o éschatos kai o zon.*) He is the One who was dead and is alive, and lives forever. And the keys of death and hell (Hades, the place of the dead,) are in His hands now. This is Jesus in His glory, as John saw Him before, on the mountain.

Rev.1.19 – 20 The Lord instructs him to write of things present and future to the seven churches, whose messengers are represented by the seven stars in His hand. The word messenger here is the Greek word *ángelos*, translated in many places as ‘angel’. Yet it is the word also used for messenger (Matt.11.10, Mark 1.2) and there is not the distinction between the words in the Greek which English has made. If the word *ángelos* here means ‘spiritual being, angel’, why would John write a letter to a spiritual being? If on the other hand it means ‘guardian’ or ‘overseer of the church’, it would be an unprecedented use of the term to mean someone in leadership. It could also mean the church gathered there, watched over by a spiritual guardian assigned to them. There can be no certainty, which is why it is unwise to build dogmas around the supposed angelic oversight of churches on the basis of this terminology.

It is of note that the nineteenth century ‘Communion Under Apostles’ founded by Edward Irving in London in 1832, later known as the Catholic Apostolic church called its overseeing leaders ‘Angels’ on the strength of one interpretation of Revelation 1.20.

Letters to the Seven Churches

Each letter follows a similar format; an address, followed by the divine evaluation of the church’s state, prefaced by ‘I know.’

Each letter ends with an exhortation for what the Spirit is saying to be heard by the church and an encouragement to persevere, with rewards given ‘to the one who overcomes’ (Greek Τῷ νικῶντι *to nikónti*, literally, to one victorious and continuing to be victorious.)

Rev.2.1-7 The first letter is to Ephesus, in the provincial capital, and most probably the mother-church (metropole) of the region. It was a thriving seaport on the Aegean, on the west coast of what is today Turkey. The evaluation opens with affirmation – they have doctrinally pure and have resisted interlopers with false teachings. They have withstood persecution and are still enthusiastic.

Yet the points for attention are that they have lost their first love, their initial ardour for the Lord; having been so attentive to the detail of what is correct teaching and what is not, they have lost sight of the One it is all about, and the need to experience relationship at first hand with Him. The call is to turn around, think anew, or else they will pass out of existence, their light extinguished. In their stickling for right belief, however, there is commendation for their resistance of the Nicolaitans, whose ungodly practices are simply unknown to us, although later writers speculate on them, and even suggest that the Nicolas referred to was one of the seven stewards called in Acts 6.5, i.e. Nicolas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. There is, however, no evidence for such an assumption.

If they can persevere, they will be granted to share in the tree of life in God’s paradise.

Rev.2.8-11 Smyrna (modern Izmir in Turkey) was a second important Aegean port further south along the coast. The Lord knows what they are going through, what it costs them to be believers, yet they are to reckon themselves rich. It seems that they are being oppressed by the local Jewish establishment, who may be spearheading the persecution; some of them are going to be imprisoned, some may even die. Yet they are urged to be faithful, to receive the crown finally. The one who persists, and is victorious will not experience the second, eternal death.

Rev.2.12-17 Pergamum (or Pergamon) had been until 133BC an autonomous kingdom. It lay 16 miles inland from the sea, on an outcrop overlooking the River Caicus. It was particularly known for its acropolis, with a great temple to Zeus, today reconstructed in the Pergamum museum in Berlin, Germany.

John speaks here in the name of the one whose words are sword-sharp. Pergamum is located where Satan has his throne – probably a reference to the temple of Zeus. They have seen martyrdom for Christ in the brother, Antipas, who has been killed as a believer.

In spite of their strength, they are to be held to account for their eating idol-offered meat and for sexual laxity. Unlike Ephesus, they are not resisting the Nicolaitan teaching, which may be connected to some of the sinful activities named. This has to be dealt with, lest they be destroyed with the sharp mouth-sword of Jesus. In their victory, they will receive God's food, instead of that of idols, and a white stone, engraved with a new name, perhaps a reference to some pagan tradition of Pergamum, which this time will carry the descriptor of their true identity in God.

Rev.2.18-29 Thyatira was originally Greek Πελοπία, but in 290BC King Seleucus I renamed it when he had a daughter born to him, the name deriving from the Greek word for 'daughter' (Greek θυγατήρ *thyghatýr* > Thyatira.) It is the modern Turkish town of Akhisar, inland from Ephesus and Smyrna.

The Thyatirans are commended by Jesus for their love and faith, and their perseverance. However, they are being plagued by a prophetess, who is encouraging their attendance at pagan idol-feasts which also give opportunity in their debauchery for sexual misconduct. It seems she has been warned before, and now she will be brought to a stop by sickness. There seems also to be a strong element of Gnosticism in this woman's teaching, since the stronger Thyatirans have not 'learned Satan's so-called deep secrets', a reference to the Gnostic practice of using secret passwords to access higher spiritual planes. The Lord encourages them to persevere until He comes, and to those victorious will be given rule and power, the 'morning star', which brings dawn and daylight.

Rev.3.1-6 Sardis is modern Turkish Sart, at one time provincial capital of the kingdom of Lydia. Its river, the Pactolus, was gold-bearing, and it was known for great wealth and creative arts.

Sardis receives no words of affirmation. They think they are doing well, but actually they are dead – proof that it is possible to have a dead church! They need to turn around, and revive what is moribund, before it is too late.

There are, however, a few who have stayed clean; these who overcome will be dressed in white and found (perhaps unlike others) having their names still inscribed in the Lamb's book of life.

Rev.3.7-13 Philadelphia is modern Alaşehir in Turkey, sixty-five miles inland from Izmir (Smyrna) in the valley of the River Cogamus. The city was named Philadelphia (brother-love) by King Eumenes II in the second century BC out of love for his brother, Attalus, who succeeded him as king. In Roman times, it was a particular centre of Emperor worship. It was also in an earthquake zone.

Jesus addresses them as He who holds the key of David; this is of note, since the Philadelphian believers are being persecuted by the Jewish establishment here, as in Smyrna. They will, however, not go through the ordeal which others will experience. For their overcoming, they will be established as a pillar, engraved with the name of God and the coming new Jerusalem – a sign of permanence in an area where many buildings could be flooded in an instant through earthquakes.

Rev.3.14-22 Laodicea was a city in the Lycus valley, near the modern Turkish village of Eskihisar. It was twelve miles west of Colossae, to which Paul's letter was addressed, and about seven south of Hierapolis, a place of Graeco-Roman pilgrimage with hot springs. The town was very wealthy, with magnificent buildings.

Jesus in speaking to this church is called the 'Amen', the great Yes. There are no words from Him of commendation to Laodicea, for it is a place of lukewarm faith. Like the rest of the city, the church is rich; what they have realised is that, having so much materially, they have little in spirit. They need to become rich in God, to avoid them being spat out.

The Lord confirms his love, however, by saying He only corrects those He loves. He is in fact standing at their door, their rich, paneled and knocking to come in, to commune with them. For those who overcome, they will share in the throne-rights of the Son.

Day 362

The Worship of Heaven and Earth

Revelation 4.1 – 8.6

More than in any other work of the New Testament, in John's Revelation it is made clear that Jesus Christ is none other than God, to be worshipped, praised and adored with the same devotion as the Father Himself. John's beloved friend and master is the One He sees at the centre of God's majesty, the One exalted to the highest place.

Rev.4.1-6 With the words to the seven churches completed, John now looks to see an open door into heaven, into the unseen realm and hears a voice calling him to step through it. He then describes himself as being 'in the Spirit', (Greek *ἐν πνεύματι en pneúmati*) that is, in an entranced state, such as the ancient prophets experience (cf. Ezekiel in Ez. 37.1.) He is before the throne of God, very like the one envisioned in Ezekiel 1.26, but around the central place are twenty-four thrones. Being twice twelve, these represent most readily the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve emissaries of the lamb, although John does not give them this connection, and this cannot be stated categorically. The thrones belong to the elders (Greek *πρεσβύτεροι presbýteri*.) the representatives of mankind before God.

The throne is a source of powerful, dynamic light, with seven lamps burning before it, representing the Spirit of God in his seven-fold character, filling heaven and earth. Just as at the beginning, the Spirit is to be found here in the fulfilment of all things. Around the throne is a crystalline lake – the language of vision seems to be stretched to the limits to describe what John sees.

Rev.4.7-8 There before the throne also are the four beings identified also with Ezekiel 1, but they also are winged like the seraphim of Isaiah 6 with six wings, as them crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy'. They seem to represent the earth, being four in number and all bearing the likeness of earthly creatures. Yet they are also heavenly in nature, accompanying God constantly.

Rev.4.9-11 The living beings seem to be taking the initiative in offering praise and worship to the Lord, in which the twenty-four elders join by prostrating themselves, offering their crowns and declaring the worth of the One who has created and sustains all things.

Rev.5.1-4 Again following the symbols of Ezekiel, (Ez.2) John sees a scroll, but this one is sealed with seven seals. The seal speaks of a royal enactment, something of mystery enclosed until the time appointed for it. There is a need for these seals to be broken to enable the story to be continued, and none is a match for the task. John is deeply moved and weeps much at this impasse which he witnesses.

Rev.5.5-7 One of the elders comforts John and points him to the Lion of Judah, the description of Judah's tribe from Gen.49.9. This One is also of the Root-stock (Greek ῥίζα *rhíza*) of David, and He is the victor to open the seals of the scroll. But as John looks, it is not a lion he sees, but a slaughtered lamb, right in the middle of the throne, with the elders and creatures around him. Here is John putting Christ the Lamb of God in the central place alongside the Father. He is also, like the Spirit, seven-fold, having seven horns (representing power) and seven eyes (representing knowledge and insight.) He is therefore shaped by the Spirit who has been poured out on all flesh. This One comes to take the scroll from the Father on the throne.

Rev.5.8-10 The elders and creatures now burst out in a declaration of praise in honour of Christ, furnished as they are also with musical instruments and with bowls of incense, formed of the prayers of the unique people of God in the earth.

The Lamb is worthy to open the seals because of His sacrifice which has unlocked the purposes of God not just for Israel but for all nations and peoples, incorporating them into one new polity, the priests of God, His ambassadors who mediate the direct rule of His kingship on earth.

*To John the Beloved, God unveiled the sight
Of the hosts of heaven worshipping in holy light;
Looking for a conquering lion, he beheld a lamb
Slain in sacrifice, God's vow fulfilled to Abraham.*

Here is the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham, the summing of the story – through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, the nations are restored to their purpose, to their communion with the Creator.

Rev. 5.11-12 The praise is joined now by the angelic beings, the spirit-servants of God who also recognise the Lamb's achievement and ascribe glory to Him.

Rev.5.13-14 The song of the Lamb is now shared by every creature in heaven and on earth, in every place, singing equally to the Father and the Lamb praise and honour. The Lamb is worshipped as God, and the living beings and elders give worship to them.

Rev.6.1-2 Now the Lamb begins to open the seals, the undoing of each resulting in a corresponding event. One of the four beings shouts 'Come' (Greek ἔρχου *érchou*) and a white horse with rider appears, looking like a royal warrior, one ready to conquer by force of arms. There is a suggestion that the warrior represents the Parthians who at this time were some of the strongest opposition to Rome.

Rev.6.3-4 At the opening of the second seal, a second creature calls out and a red horse and rider appear, robed in fire. He is armed with a sword and is also warlike, with power to turn men against one another.

Rev.6.5-6 The third seal reveals a black horse, whose rider carries scales; at his appearance there is what seems to be a market-vendor's call, offering a quart of wheat for one day's wages, an exorbitant amount, but an offer typical of times of siege or famine, when demand outstrips supply and prices rocket. This horseman seems therefore to represent want and famine.

Rev.6.7-8 The fourth horse is pale and its rider is Death, followed by Hades (Hell, the place of the dead.) These herald the coming of all kinds of terrible powers of destruction.

Rev.6.9-11 At the opening of the fifth seal, the cry is heard of the martyrs from the altar of God, calling for vindication. They address the Lord by an unusual title, *the holy and true despot* (Greek ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ὁ ἀληθινός *o dhespótees o ághios kai o aleethinós*), a term most often used of the owner of slaves. At this cry, they are all given white robes, but are told to be patient until the full tally of the martyrs who are giving their lives for Christ is known.

Rev.6.12-17 As the sixth seal is broken by the Lamb, there is a cataclysm in the earth and skies; everything seems to be breaking up, above and below, while humans are levelled in their status, all human authority breaking down before the unfolding closedown of all things by God on the throne and the avenging Lamb. This is the *Dies Irae*, the 'Day of the Lord', the day of analysis and retribution, but also paves the way for the restoration of creation.

Rev.7.1-3 There is a pause before the final seal is broken. Four angelic beings are ready to release the full pelt of the elements against the earth, but before this, an angel bearing God's signet, His seal or mark calls to the other four to hold back until the servants of God (Greek οἱ οὐλοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ *dhóuli tou Theóu* literally, slaves of God,) are marked with their master's mark, showing whose they truly are.

Rev. 7.4-8 Now are revealed all those who have believed in Christ of the people of Israel; the number is symbolic, from the dozen tribes, twelve thousand of each (note that Levi is included and Joseph counts as one tribe in this analysis.) This represents the fact that Israel has many believers in the Mashiach, the Messiah, and that they are from every tribe, including the priesthood.

Rev.7.9-10 John then sees the fulfilment of the promise that all nations would be blessed through Abraham's seed. A sea of people, innumerable, like sand on the shore or stars in the sky, stood before the throne, clothed in white and with palms of praise in hand, shouting and ascribing their magnificent rescue to God and the Lamb. (Let those take note who decry the expression of great emotion in worship!)

Rev.7.11-12 The angels join in the worship of God who has accomplished His promised intention, who has fulfilled His *Chasidic* commitment to the earth.

Rev.7.13-14 One of the elders asks John if he knows who the people in white are. John asks to know, and is told that these are the *overcomers*, the ones who have persevered through the great Suffering (Greek ἡ θλίψις ἡ μεγάλη *ee thlipsis ee meghálee*.) and have washed their robes in the blood of Christ, out of which they come white, not red.

Rev.7.15-17 These yielded ones will be in God's home, at His throne, supplied and protected, the Lamb of God their shepherd and comfort.

Rev.8.1-6 The Lamb now opens the seventh seal, and there is silence for half an hour. This silence is so pregnant; the heavens and earth hold their breath, the thoughts of all are on what has been and what will be. It is the calm before the storm, time to reflect, time to prepare. Every silence into which the man or woman of God enters is an anticipation of that great silence of heaven.

As the silence comes to an end, seven angels are each given a trumpet. In Jewish angelology, there are seven archangels; Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Raguel, Sariel and Remiel. It would seem that these are the ones referred to here.

At the same time, more incense is brought to the altar before the throne, the fragrance of the prayer and intercession of the saints. Taking fire from the altar, the angel pours it down onto the earth, with devastating effect. Now the seven angels lift the trumpets to their lips.

Day 363

Revelation; The Struggle of Faith

Revelation 8.7 – 13.18

Rev.8.7 The first angelic trumpet is sounded, and hail and fire, mixed with blood fall, consuming a third of the earth with trees and pasture. This seems to hark back to the plagues on Egypt of the Exodus, with two of the constituents of hail and blood being some of the terrors coming on that land. John's use of 'the third part' in this chapter is to indicate a partial, not a total destruction.

Rev.8.8-9 John would have known of the devastating eruption of Vesuvius and the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79AD. He envisions a similar catastrophe affecting the seas and shipping.

Rev.8.10-11 A meteorite strike affects the water supplies of the earth, which are polluted and made unusable. The meteorite is called Wormwood (Greek ῥᾶψις ἄψινθος *Ápsinthos*, from which comes the name of the liqueur, *Absinthe*.)

Rev.8.12 The light of the celestial bodies is partially cut off, leading to unlit darkness day and night for part of the earth.

Rev.8.13 An eagle is seen by John flying and calling ‘Woe!’ (Aramaic *oy*, Greek *ouái*) to the earth because if the first four blasts have not been bad enough, the next three will be unbearable.

Rev.9.1-6 The fifth trumpet introduces a spiritual being, called a star by John, but to whom is given the key to open the abyss (Greek ἀβύσσοϛ *abhýssos*, meaning *without fathoming, beyond sounding* as of a bottomless ocean.) This is a place of fire, the place where evil has been held. Now, it emerges, in the form of another of the Exodus plagues, locusts, but locusts with the sting of scorpions. The creatures are given permission to attack the unmarked, the slaves of God being passed over. This torture is extreme, and yet not fatal.

Rev.9.7-12 The locusts are described by John in terms exceeding normal human understanding. He is grappling to paint a scene in words which goes beyond his experience – is he describing a future reality, or a symbolic mystery? In his capturing the scene, he has the locusts like horses, but with manes like human hair, and crowned. They are armoured and make a vast noise, and are empowered to harm, under the command of ‘the messenger of the abyss’, named here both in Hebrew, Abaddon (Heb. אַבְדּוֹן *Abhaddon*, one who destroys) and in Greek, Apollyon (Greek Ἀπολλύων *Apollyon*). Traditionally, this creature is identified with satan, the devil. There is no other reference to Abaddon or Apollyon in Scripture, though there are references from the Essene community at Qumran in the Dead Sea Scrolls to Abaddon as a place of destruction, synonymous with Sheol. This onslaught, which by-passes the God-marked, is called the first woe.

Rev.9.13-16 With the sixth trumpet, the four angels who were restrained from unleashing their powers in 7.1 are now let go from their post, now at the River Euphrates, in the Fertile Crescent. This is significant to John, because it marks the eastern border of the Roman Empire, and beyond it lie the Parthians, the dread enemies of Rome. The forces of the four angels are let go, and swarm across the land in terrible pillage.

Rev.9.17-19 Once again, John is struggling with his knowledge to describe the horror of the warfare going on, with horses which have lions’ heads and snake-like tails. Once again the scale of the destruction is immense.

Rev.9.20-21 Despite the affliction and terror that these cataclysms bring, humankind not marked with God’s mark are not prepared to change their ways. They go on with idolatry and materialism – worshipping what does not ‘see, hear or walk’ – and with violence, occult, sexual promiscuity and robbery.

Rev.10.1-4 There is a break in the progression of the sounding of the trumpets, before the sounding of the last call, as there was a break before the opening of the seventh seal. An angelic being with a little scroll comes from heaven, and lands astride land and sea. He opens his mouth and the sound of seven thunders comes out. John is not permitted to record what the message of the seven thunders is, which is to be kept a mystery, even though presumably John heard it.

Rev.10.5-7 The angel who has just spoken now swears an oath (interesting given Christ’s prohibition on oath-taking) that what God has promised will now happen, bringing to completion the purpose of God, currently hidden from view, at the sounding of the seventh trumpet.

Rev.10.8-11 John, like Ezekiel before him (Ez.3.1) , is told to eat the little scroll in the thundering angel's hand. As with Ezekiel's scroll it tastes like honey, but it makes John feel sick – it is the sign of the word of the Lord bringing judgement to the earth. The word itself is precious and welcome, but its application is bitter.

Rev.11.1-2 There are further echoes of Ezekiel here as John is told to measure the Temple and the altar, which by John's time of writing had been destroyed. This is clear from the reference to the outer court being trampled by the Nations.

Rev.11.3-6 Power is to be given to two witnesses (Greek μάρτυς *mártys*, from which English *martyr*,) to prophesy for a number of years. The symbol of these two is the same as that shown to Zechariah of the olive trees supplying the lampstand in Zec.4.3. Their powers point to their identity as being Elijah, who halted the rain and Moses, who turned the Nile to blood, and they represent the whole story of God's covenant with the earth, being also the two who appeared with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration. They are also the two figures believed by Jews not to have experienced physical death.

Rev.11.7-10 When they have finished their declarations, they are murdered by a creature called *the Beast* (Greek τὸ θηρίον *to theerion*, meaning a wild animal, something untameable,) who has come up from the abyss. This is shocking, since these are the two who have transcended death. Their corpses lie in Jerusalem, which is uncharacteristically likened to Sodom and to Egypt, but this is because it is the city which crucified the Lord Jesus. The two witnesses must go the way of the cross with Jesus. The worldlings celebrate triumph over God's messengers, or so they think.

Rev.11.11-14 But, just as with the Lord Jesus, the Spirit-breath of God who raised Christ enters the dead bodies of the two witnesses and raises them up, calling them to ascend to the same place where Jesus is seated. At this point, the city of Jerusalem endures an earthquake. This is the second woe, says John.

Rev.11.15 With God's power of resurrection now decisively revealed, the last trumpet sounds. There is a declaration out of the unseen sphere, and we are focussed back on the throne and the worship of heaven, where with the ascension of the risen witnesses, praise breaks out again. The direct rule of God in Christ is now secured, the transformation of all things has come.

Rev.11.16-18 The elders, in their worship prostrate before the throne, announce the reign of God over the nations, the time for judgement of the dead and for the evaluation of the lives of men and women, prophets and holy ones, and for destruction of the wreckers of earth.

Rev.11.19 At this, in the unseen realm, God's true temple, the unseen one, is revealed, with the ark of the covenant at its heart, but now visible, not hidden behind a curtain. Great power is released.

Rev.12.1-6 There is now a portent in the skies; a pregnant woman clothed in light and surrounded with heavenly bodies appears, obviously with labour pains. This is the sign of incarnation, the holy mystery of God become man through the womb of a woman. At this point, a great seven-headed, ten-horned dragon appears, the sign of the ancient Babylonian myth of Tiamat, perhaps, symbolising the opposition of idol non-gods in all their variety.

The dragon seems about to eat the child coming from the woman, but he is snatched from the jaws of the beast and taken to God's presence – a pointer to the whole Gospel story. The woman now goes to the desert – she is also the picture of the church of Christ.

Rev.12.7-9 John is now given a glimpse into a celestial battle going on, between the spiritual forces of idolatry summed up by the dragon and the forces of God, led by the archangel Michael. The dragon, who is the devil, is cast down, to the earth. This is a clear understanding given by John of where satan came from and how he comes to be busy on earth.

Rev.12.10-12 The announcement of satan's defeat is broadcast from heaven, bringing the rescue and direct rule of God to earth, because the 'accuser' (i.e. satan) has been defeated. He is overcome by the blood of Jesus sacrifice but also by the faithful witness to its efficacy of the saints, the uniquely formed army of God's people, who are ready to lose their mortal lives for His glory.

Now, heaven is called to celebration, because all satan's influence is ended there. The bad news is that earth and seas have become his prowling place, and he is determined to do as much damage as possible in the short time left.

Rev.12.13-13.1a Being now earthbound, satan seeks out the mother of the boy who is now in heaven, which is the symbol of the church of Christ. Despite the attempts of the beast to overwhelm her, she escapes and is taken care of, with divinely-provided deliverance from the power of the dragon. However, the dragon persists and seeks to take arms against the followers of Jesus.

Rev.13.1b-4 It is clear that the rise of the beast is a reference to the Roman Empire, with some link to the crowns of the Caesars. The blasphemous names would refer to the practice of emperor-worship which turned the ruler into a god. The beast's power comes from satan, and the whole world is in its power. It seems invincible, like the Empire itself, having recovered already from what seemed to be a fatal wound, now healed.

Rev.13.5-10 The beast, symbol of the Empire of Rome, is given power to overcome the holy ones of God. The beast is worshipped by all on earth, except those belonging to Christ- a reference to the Romans' demand that all their subjects worship Caesar and burn incense to him. (The Jews were exempted from this demand, if they agreed to pray for Caesar.) Christians however refused to say 'Caesar is Lord', saying instead, 'Jesus is Lord'. There is a short exhortation to the suffering saints here – imprisonment and death may come, but the saints must endure and win through.

Rev.13.11-18 The second beast seems to have some of the qualities of Christ, but is speaking with the voice of satan. This is the antiChrist. It seems to have a spiritual power to make the first beast worshipped. There are occult signs attached to it, and it calls for an image of the first beast to be erected and worshipped – a clear reference to the images of the Emperor set up everywhere.

The second beast also enforces a branding, like the mark of God on his people, perhaps a reference to Roman citizenship, or a certificate of sacrifice to the Emperor, which separates

those accepted by Rome from the plebs, the peasants and slaves. Without this, trade cannot be carried out. The mark is the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

This last reference is key in understanding the infamous 666 symbol. The Caesar who had caused so much harm to the church was Nero, even though Domitian was now in power. It was Nero who had outlawed Christianity.

The number and name reference in Rev.13.18 point to the fact that in Jewish numerology, all letters have a numerical value (A, or א *Aleph* is 1, B, or ב *Bet* is 2, and so forth.) When the common Greek name for Nero Caesar, *Neron Kesar* is rendered in Hebrew, it becomes קסר נרון – the letters used being N (Nun = 50), R (Resh = 200), W (Vav= 6), N (Nun again = 50), Q (Qoph = 100), S (Samekh = 60) and R (Resh once more = 200) , vowels not being written in standard Hebrew.

Adding the values together, the total is 666. Interestingly, some ancient manuscripts seem to have the number of the beast as 616. If the last N on Neron is taken away, and he is just *Nero Kesar*, it gives a value instead of 616, pointing even more decisively to a link between the number of the beast and the Emperor Nero.