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**Sunday 4 February 2024 to**

**Sunday 11 February 2024**

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Sunday 4 February 2024

**A solitary place**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went to a solitary place, where he prayed (Mark 1:35).***

Read [Mark 1:29–39](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+1%3A29-39&version=NRSVUE)

Do you feel the need to just keep going, keep doing? So much demanded of you, so much you demand of yourself. Not enough hours in the day to get everything done. Some days it seems like we just can’t find a moment to be still. And then some of that exhaustive behaviour we bring on ourselves. If you’re into social media, then you can easily get caught up in feeling the need for constant contact and continuous interaction, to the point that you can get edgy if no-one is responding to anything. Then there’s the question only you can answer: What is it that is demanding so much of you?

Jesus had constant crowds following him, demanding his attention. He healed, he alleviated suffering, and the crowds demanded more and more of him. At the end of Mark chapter 1, we read ‘Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere’ (1:45b).

Jesus chose to find time to be alone. He chose to find time to spend with his Heavenly Father. He chose to find time to pray. He knew what the demands of the day ahead were going to be, so he chose to find a solitary place. He got up while it was still dark so that he could be still before the day began. To just be instead of having always to do. To draw strength. To stay focused. To hear from his Father and align with his will. Especially important for Jesus because what demanded so much of his energy was his ministry of bringing God’s wholeness to as many as possible.

In that solitary place, Jesus received the sure hand of his Father on him for the day ahead. Is that what you need? So you can distinguish between what is important and what is just time-consuming. So you can align your day with God’s will for you and for others. A solitary place. A God-place.

***Father, it all gets a bit much sometimes. When I look for a place to set aside to tune in to you, be there. Be there and give me what I need for the day ahead. Amen.***

*Pastor Jim is a retired pastor living on Brisbane Northside. He served in Papua New Guinea and as school pastor in a number of schools and congregations with schools. He is married to Ruth and has three children and seven grandchildren and loves them all unconditionally. He loves to share the gospel as simply and clearly as he can.*

Monday 5 February 2024

**Taking God seriously**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads (Revelation 9:4).***

Read [Revelation 9:1–12](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+9%3A1-12&version=NRSVUE)

I hope you didn’t read this reading just before going to bed. The stuff of nightmares. It has been said that this chapter is the scariest one in the whole Bible. Cataclysmic eruptions, torture, agony, beasts that seem to have both human and animal features, destruction. The Book of Revelation is a lot like that. And it is a book that many Christians have used to interpret their own times, often in ways that suit their own purposes. In humility, we can readily say that so many of these things are difficult to understand. But one thing we can do is look for what God might want to say to us – to you – as you look for something to keep you going each day.

Let me ask you: do you take God seriously? How does God feel about the way we live and the way our society operates? Does he turn a blind eye to our misplaced priorities? How does the One who says there is to be no other god but him feel about those ‘other gods’ we seem to want to bow before? If we take God seriously, should we be afraid?

Yes. And no. Yes, because God will hold us to account. And no, because those who have the seal of God on their foreheads are protected. That is you. All hell can surround you, and the storm can be so destructive it will destroy a lot in its path, but you are protected. God is so serious about you that he finds a way to set you apart from the consequences of his anger, an anger that is real. He calls you ‘son’ and ‘daughter’ and ‘redeemed’.

In the mayhem so vividly described in the Book of Revelation, see God at his most serious, and don’t take that lightly. But also see the little gems that sparkle among all the doom and gloom. In fact, look for them and let them shine into your life.

***God who is love, help me to take seriously your warnings but to also take seriously your loving protection. I make the sign of a cross on my forehead in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

Tuesday 6 February 2024

**Great anger; great grace**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***The rest of humankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent (Revelation 9:20a).***

Read [Revelation 9:13–21](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+9.13-21&version=NRSVUE)

Many of us were raised in a church where the central theme has always been grace. God loves us unconditionally, not because we are worthy of it, but just because he does. In fact, he loves us despite the way we are. That is such a precious thing. But I wonder whether we could have heard it so often and for so long that we have lost our appreciation for how precious that is. Precious and costly.

When we read the terrifying events of this chapter and see what it is like when the anger of God is poured out on those who have replaced him with something else and his anger toward those who, despite all the warnings, still refuse to repent, then to know that this God, capable of such destruction, is gracious – well, that makes that grace something very special. Make no mistake: there is an opportunity to repent, turn around a pattern of living and refocus. But when, despite all the warnings, there is ‘still’ (verse 20) no repentance, all hell will break loose – literally.

How do you respond to this? When I was in Papua New Guinea, an overseas church group showed a film on the main oval of the town. The film was called something like *The Fires of Hell* and depicted in graphic fashion what hell would be like. And then they gave an altar call. If you don’t want to be in the fires of hell, come forward. And, as can be expected, people went forward in droves. Scared into heaven to avoid the fires of hell!

Because we can get an idea of what it might be like when all God’s fury is unleashed, when we know that, in Jesus, he reaches out to us and accepts us illogically, undeservedly, because he chooses to, then we are overwhelmed. God’s grace is great because his anger is great. But his grace trumps his anger. Then we have no words but thank you.

***Great God, I am overwhelmed that you should spare us from your anger. It humbles me. Thank you. Amen.***

Wednesday 7 February 2024

**A rainbow above his head**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***He was robed in a cloud, with a rainbow above his head; his face was like the sun and his legs were like fiery pillars (Revelation 10:1b).***

Read [Revelation 10:1–11](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+10.1-11&version=NRSVUE)

How are you going with these Revelation readings? These past chapters have been pretty frightening. Remember that the purpose of this book is primarily to encourage Christians who are increasingly under the threat of persecution and living in a context where the worship of the true God is challenged by contrary ideas. So, as I mentioned in an earlier devotion, look for the gems.

This chapter begins with a description of an angel. It describes the angel with a rainbow around his head, his face like the sun and legs like fiery pillars. Sounds like a good angel to me. It depicts the God who saves, the God who protects. We can recall the rainbow Noah witnessed after the great flood and the accompanying promise that never again will there be such universal destruction. And the sun sheds its light and shows the way. And the legs like pillars of fire remind us of how when the sun wasn’t shining, there was still light as God went before and behind the people of Israel when they were led out of the slavery of Egypt.

So, in all the mayhem, in all the fury and destruction, the God who saves is part of the scenario. We don’t know the message of this angel clearly, but we know that the protecting and saving God is at work. A bit like your life and mine. It can seem like there is no answer – like everything is against you and this year couldn’t possibly be as bad as last year – but God stands with the rainbow above his head, shining like the sun, his legs as fiery pillars to reveal the way ahead. You can read these chapters of Revelation and be afraid of what it might mean. Or you can take comfort: whatever it refers to, a present struggle between good and evil or a future one, God will not abandon you and all those who worship him.

***God of heaven and earth, I know that you go before me to show the way and are behind me to see if I fall and pick me up again. When things are scary, help me focus on that. Amen.***

Thursday 8 February 2024

**The breath of life from God**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***But after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them (Revelation 11:11a).***

Read [Revelation 11:1–14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+11.1-14&version=NRSVUE)

Days of persecution. The beast (the enemy of the Lamb) attacks. Three and a half days – half of the perfect number (seven) – so an imperfect attack, but still fierce in intensity. And then the breath of life from God. In the constant turmoil we read about in these chapters, terrible as it is, God is always there. He cares for his own. God looks out for those who are faithful in their worship. He rescues. He saves.

You are familiar with the phrase, ‘the breath of God’. We recall the act of creation when God took some soil and shaped it, moulded it and then breathed his breath into what he created, and it became a living being: a breath-filled, spirit-filled being. And then, when Jesus met with his disciples after the resurrection, he ‘breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”’ – the holy breath, the breath of life (John 20:22). When the breath of life from God goes in, there is a lifting up, there is a linking of spirit with Spirit, there is safety, security, salvation.

In the cosmic battle between good and evil that is being waged all the time (not just at the end of times), good always triumphs. The Lamb on the throne defeats the beast from the abyss. The first readers of this revelation can know that, and you can, too.

CS Lewis said that there are two dangers for Christians when thinking about Satan: to not give him enough attention and to give him too much attention. When we read these words in Revelation, we need to give attention to the terrible, divine punishment for those who constantly refuse to repent. But we also need to not give this so much attention that we miss the ultimate truth: God wins. Jesus defeats the enemy. You can be unafraid. God breathes his creative breath into his faithful ones, and they can stand firmly on their feet (verse 11). The end result is that the God of heaven receives glory (verse 13).

***Creative God, continually breathe your breath into me so that I can stand strong when the attack is fierce. Amen.***

Friday 9 February 2024

**Christ rules, okay?**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord (Revelation 11:15b).***

Read [Revelation 11:15–19](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+11.15-19&version=NRSVUE)

In Jewish worship, the sounding of the seventh trumpet signalled the singing of a hymn of thanksgiving and praise. And so, here, the voices of heaven sing their thanksgiving song, a victory song. The battle has been fierce and long. The kingdoms of Earth have been put in their place. The faithful have remained true. Who is the real king? Who holds the reins of power? The Lord Jesus does. And he does ‘forever and ever’.

Be of no doubt. This is the status of things in the heavenly realm, and so in this earthly realm. At the end of World War II, after peace had been negotiated and become a reality, fighting continued in some places. The news had not reached them. They hadn’t heard the peace proclamation, and so, needlessly, people died. If the kingdom of Satan appears to hold sway here on Earth sometimes, it is only because the proclamation of his defeat has not been heard. Satan has been defeated. Echoing an old slogan: Christ rules, okay?

In Colossians 2:15, we read this: ‘And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Christ] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross’. When a general returned home after a successful battle, they would lead in procession all the vanquished ones. People could laugh at them and hurl abuse – they had been disarmed, defeated and were now a public spectacle for amusement. That calls for the seventh trumpet. That calls for a victory song. And that song is one God’s people sing over and over and over again.

When you are overwhelmed by the world you live in, to the point that it almost seems hopeless; when things are so dark in your life that you feel as though God has been defeated; when you read these chapters in Revelation, and they frighten you, and you worry for yourself and your children and grandchildren, hear this song. Sing this song. It sings a truth that no one and nothing can take away.

***Thank you, Jesus. You have defeated all the powers of evil, and you rule supreme. You are my shield, which I hold in front of me when the attack is heavy. Thank you. Amen.***

Saturday 10 February 2024

**Consecrated ones**

by Pastor Jim Strelan

***Gather to me my consecrated ones (Psalm 50:5a).***

Read [Psalm 50:1–6](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm+50.1-6&version=NRSVUE)

In this psalm, God summons all the people of Earth before him and addresses them: those who have been faithful to their special connection and those who haven’t. To the faithful, he says he will deliver them (verse 15), and to those who have dishonoured him, he speaks words of judgement. That’s how it works.

First, he addresses his ‘consecrated ones’. The word ‘consecrate’ is a special one. When we share in holy communion, firstly, the bread and the wine are ‘consecrated’. This means that while in themselves, they are exactly as they appear to be, the basic elements of a meal are now set aside for something special. It is ‘holy’ communion, which means ‘set apart’. You may have a multi-purpose building that you use for worship. As the name suggests, it has many purposes, but when it is time for worship, that space is ‘consecrated’, set apart for a sacred purpose.

God’s people are consecrated. You are consecrated. Set apart to be what that phrase suggests: not one with, the same as everything around, but apart, different, holy. When you were baptised, God consecrated you. He called you his child and drew you into a special connection with him won by Jesus through the cross. Martin Luther suggested that the first thing we should do when we wake in the morning is to make the sign of the cross. To remember who we are. That we have been consecrated to be God’s people.

It is God who does the consecrating. He doesn’t need it. It’s not for his benefit. But it is done in an act of love. ‘I will be your God, you will be my people.’ Isn’t it good to know you are one of the consecrated ones? God doesn’t set you apart and then say, ‘Well, I wish you luck!’ No, he sets you apart and reassures you: ‘You can depend on me. I will be faithful; I will deliver you.’ If I have to stand before him when he summons all the people of Earth, then I can stand bravely. I just need to humbly remind him of what he has done, for I am one of the consecrated ones.

***Thank you, God, for setting me apart as one of your consecrated ones. As you are faithful, help me to be faithful and always look to you to be my help. Amen.***

Sunday 11 February 2024

**In good company**

by Emma Strelan

***Peter said to Jesus, ‘Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah’ (Mark 9:5).***

Read [Mark 9:2–9](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+9%3A2-9&version=NRSVUE)

Here’s a classic icebreaker question for you: if you could have any three religious/Christian figures from history over for dinner, who would they be?

My answer is CS Lewis, Phoebe (the deliverer of Paul’s letter to the Romans), and Katharina Zell (a prominent Protestant woman from the early 16th century). Oh, and I’d probably cook some kind of cheesy pasta bake, and we’d spend the night discussing cool theological matters.

Peter, James, and John’s answer to this question would have likely been Elijah, Moses and their Rabbi Jesus.

Well, the ultimate dinner party wish list comes true! I mean, Moses is the very man God used to bring salvation to the entire Israelite nation in Exodus, and Elijah was the Israelites’ most famous prophet. So, naturally, upon seeing these great figures appear in front of them, the disciples want to get their guests comfortable – put up some shelters and maybe pop open a glass of red. But this encounter doesn't end in an intellectual discussion around a three-course meal as I would have hoped my dream dinner would be.

Instead, this rendezvous is characterised by fear and bumbling, awkward interactions. A bit star-struck, are we? Well, maybe that's a little more realistic anyway.

In this story, the Jesus the disciples have been journeying with for some time now, with his scraggly hair, beard in need of a trim, and clothes that could likely do with some tough stain remover, is transfigured into a figure in dazzling white, surrounded by a cloud declaring he is God’s Son!

Here, the disciples get to see Jesus in a different light and in the company of the spiritual greats of their world. Ah, now they get it! (Or so they think.)

So, isn't it time for the rest of the world to finally realise it as well? Will Jesus walk back down the mountain, shining brightly so *all* can see and believe?

Not quite.

A moment later, it’s just Jesus and his rag-tag bunch of disciples again. As they descend back into the world of sickness, poverty, demon possession, hypocrites and death, the revealed Son of God goes with them. Clothed again in a robe stained from that morning’s breakfast: God’s Son, the Saviour of the world.

***Father God, I thank you that in the revelation of your Son with us, you leave us confirmation of your presence in this desolate world. We don’t always understand the way you reveal yourself, but we can be confident that you are here. Amen.***

*Emma works as a freelance videographer in Adelaide, and she recently joined Lutheran Media as its Production Assistant. Emma also studies theology and is heavily involved in youth camping ministry around South Australia. In her free time, she eats a lot of cheese, attempts to grow vegetables (the tomatoes have been the best success so far), and has committed the majority of her ‘casual reading’ time this year to getting through* War and Peace *by Leo Tolstoy.*