

Mapping the End Times

The Revelation of Jesus Christ - Week 1

The background is a detailed stained glass window. At the top center is a face of Jesus with long, wavy hair and a beard, set against a red and gold halo. Below this, a large white rectangular box with an orange border contains the title text. The background continues with blue panels, architectural details like spires and windows, and a lower section showing figures in red and green robes. A watermark 'STAINED GLASS' is visible at the bottom.

Part One:

Understanding the Apocalypse



Ecstasy or Artistry?

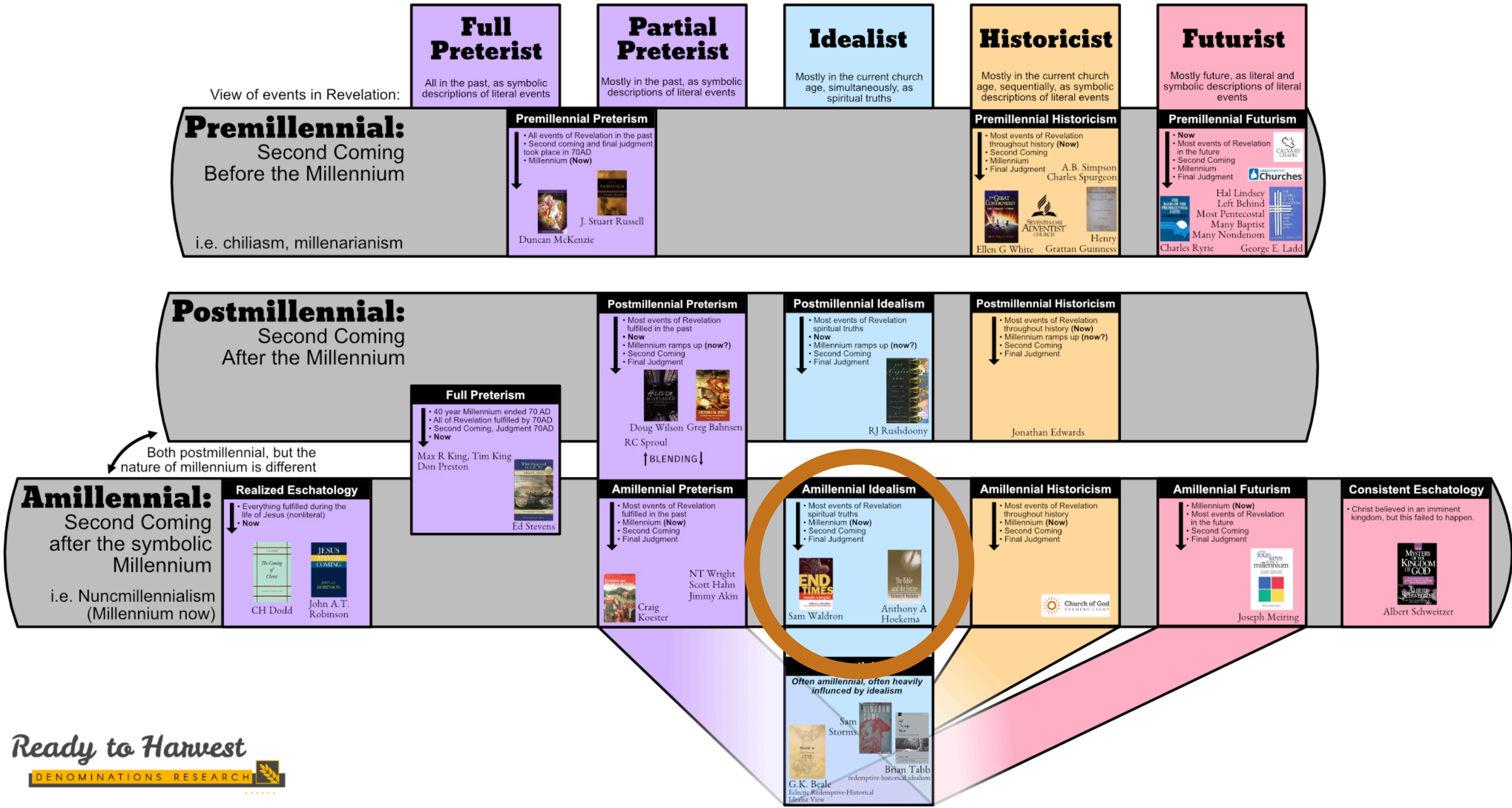
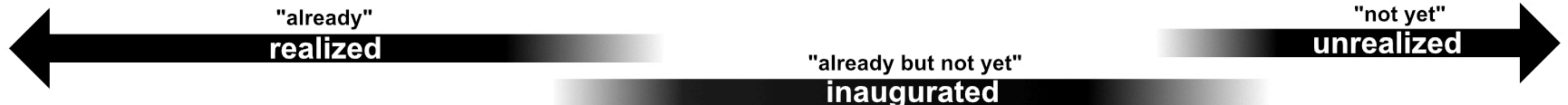
Many consider Revelation to be the most difficult book in the Bible to understand. The book's complex, symbolic scenes have left many scratching their heads, wondering what they just read. Tipping my hand a little, this usually comes from a tendency to read Revelation as a narrative vision of the end times, rather than to see it as a prophetic illustration of the Church age and the imminent return of Christ.

The Fall of the Rebel Angels by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1562

Schools of Interpretation

There have arisen many different interpretations of the book, grouped broadly into the following four categories:

- **Preterism** - the prophecies of Revelation have been fulfilled in the past, usually culminating in the destruction of the Temple in 70AD.
- **Historicism** - Revelation lays out a roadmap for the period from Christ's Ascension till the end of the world, with figures in the book mapping onto historical events and individuals.
- **Futurism** - The Apocalypse of St. John points to some future period of the Church; basically Historicism but set in the future.
- **Idealism** - Revelation presents a symbolic view of the Church age, with figures standing as repeated patterns rather than discrete events.





A Symbolic World

In this study we will favor the idealist perspective, as it is the predominate Lutheran view, as well as the one most supported by scholars of the text. As such, we need to get out of the habit of trying to match the text to historic or future events. Instead, we need to look for how the visions of St. John reveal the person and work of Jesus to us here and now.

Apocalyptic Literature

In reading most of Scripture, we must interpret the text literally until we are forced to interpret the text figuratively. The opposite is true in apocalyptic literature, such as Revelation. This is a figurative genre, which uses symbols in order to convey higher truths.

The problem that many run into when reading Revelation is a lack of familiarity with the Old Testament. There is very little original in Revelation. Nearly every symbol in the book is drawn from the Old Testament, and should be interpreted in light of the original usage.



Parsing Spiritual Symbols

Symbolic genres, such as apocalypse or poetry, use symbols to convey meaning to their reader. This imparts a richer, layered message, as every symbol has multiple, overlapping profiles of meaning:

- **Inherent** - The meaning of the symbol on the merit of its own essential character.
- **Contextual** - The meaning of the symbol within its contextual frame.
- **Canonical** - The meaning of the symbol across Scripture.
- **Authorial** - The meaning intended by the author.
- **Individual** - The meaning of the symbol as received by the reader.
- **Spiritual** - The symbol itself is a reflection of ultimate reality.

These layers of meaning often interact with, complement, and even contradict one another, making for a lot of confusion if one isn't careful to properly parse the symbolic world.

The Dispensational Elephant

Dispensationalism is a framework for interpreting the Bible which maintains that history is divided into multiple ages called 'dispensations' (usually three) in which God interacts with his chosen people in different ways. Dispensationalists believe that there is a distinction between Israel and the Church, in premillennialism, Christian Zionism, and a rapture of Christians before the expected Second Coming of Jesus, generally before the so-called Great Tribulation. This school of thought was first promoted in the mid-1800's, before becoming popular thanks to the Scofield Reference Bible of 1909.

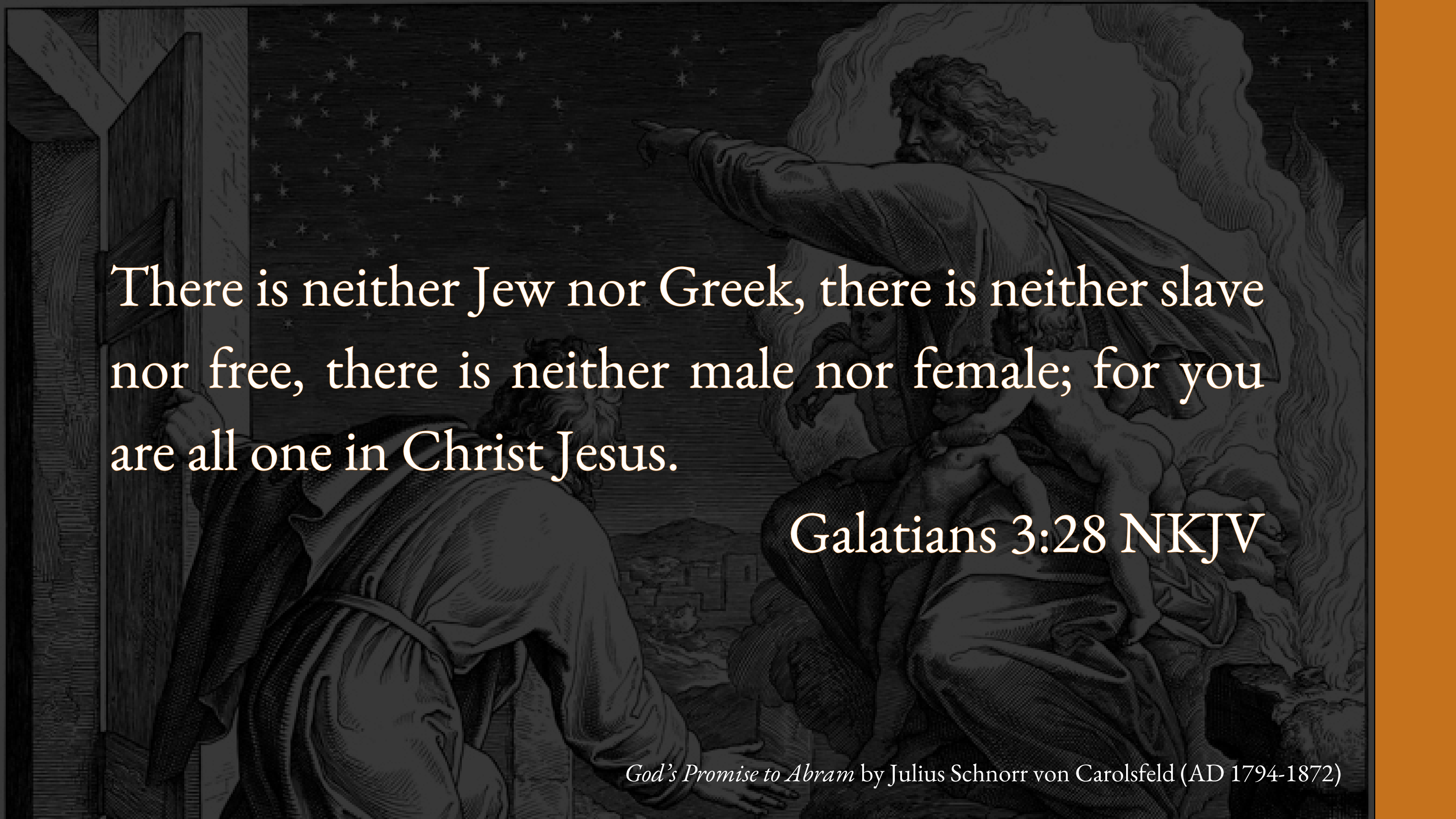


Prepare the Way, O Zion



Dispensationalism is not the historic, scholarly, or Scriptural lens by which one ought to read Revelation. While incredibly popular today (especially in the wake of the establishment of the nation of Israel and the Six-Day War), the theological underpinnings of the system undermine the core tenets of Christianity, especially salvation sola fide and all being made one in Christ Jesus.

At the end of the Six Day War, Israeli soldiers hug and kiss the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, June 11, AD 1967



There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:28 NKJV

God's Promise to Abram by Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (AD 1794-1872)

The background is a detailed stained glass window. The central panel features a portrait of Christ with long, wavy hair and a beard, wearing a red robe with a gold collar. He is flanked by blue panels. Below the central panel, there are panels with red and green robes, and a panel on the right showing a hand holding a key. The entire scene is framed by architectural elements like Gothic arches and tracery.

Part Two: **Apocalyptic Cycles**

The Letters to the Churches

The Book of Revelation opens, after a short prologue, with seven letters to various churches in Asia. The purpose of these letters is to spiritually prepare the reader for the journey they are about to embark on. As such, over the seven weeks of this study, we will be beginning each class with a different letter, both as a devotional exercise, as well as to ensure we do not neglect this less-discussed part of the Apocalypse of St. John.



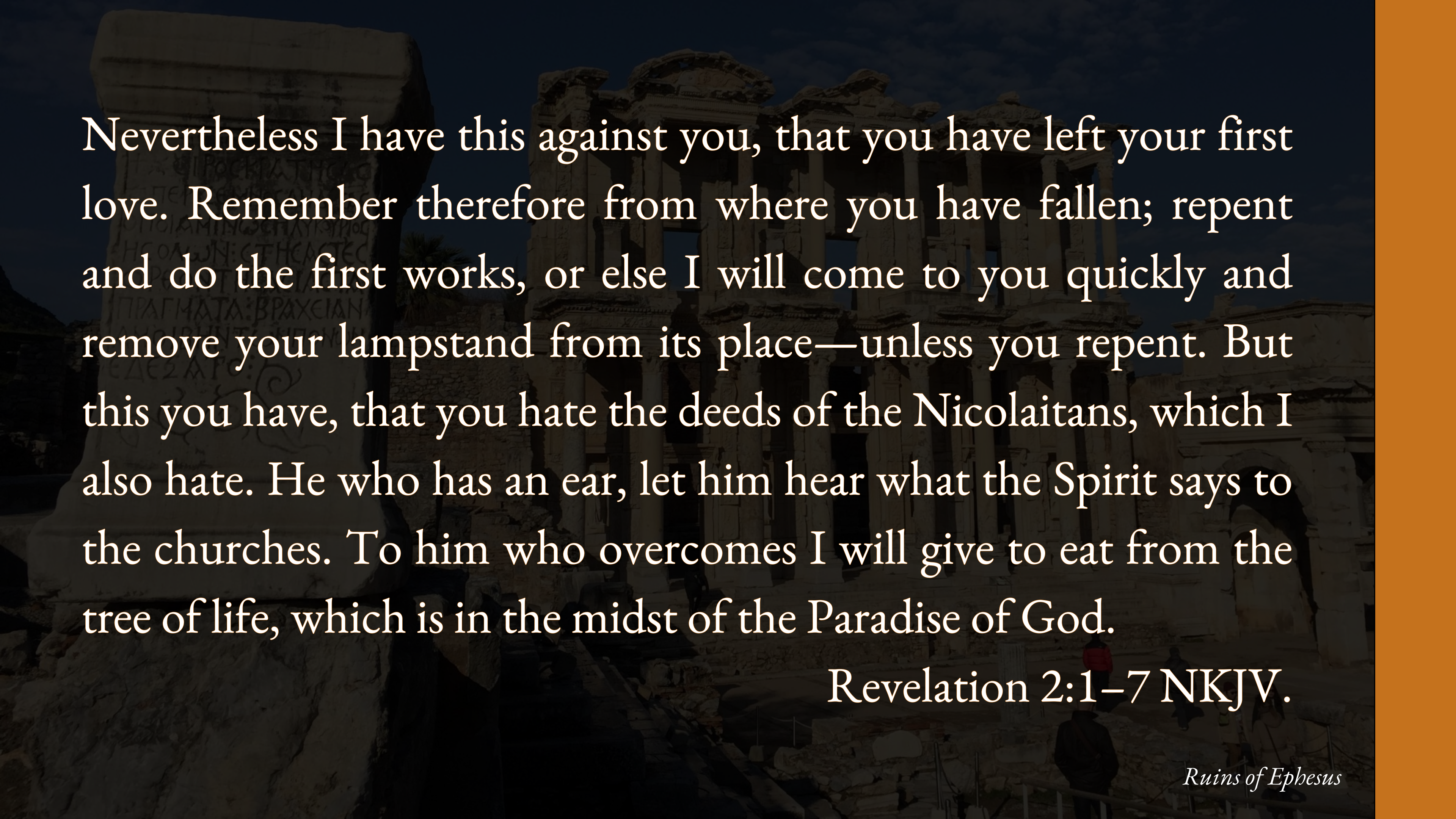
The background of the slide is a photograph of the ruins of the Temple of Apollo in Ephesus, Turkey. The image is dark and atmospheric, showing the massive stone columns and the partially reconstructed temple structure. The text is overlaid on this image in a white, serif font. On the far right, there is a solid orange vertical bar.

To the angel of the church of Ephesus write,

These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary.

Revelation 2:1–7 NKJV.

Ruins of Ephesus

The background of the slide is a photograph of the ruins of the Temple of Apollo in Ephesus, Turkey. The image is dark and atmospheric, showing the remains of a large ancient temple with many columns and a pediment. In the foreground, there are stone walls and debris. The text is overlaid on this image in a white, serif font. On the far right, there is a solid orange vertical bar.

Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent. But this you have, that you hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.

Revelation 2:1–7 NKJV.

Ruins of Ephesus

The Structure of Revelation

As mentioned at the beginning of the session, a lot of issues arise if we try to read Revelation as a straightforward linear narrative. For one thing, the world ends six or seven times in the same book! Instead, we have to approach the text as a series of repeated visions, with each repetition showing us something new about the Church age.

Following the letters to the churches, there is an inaugural vision, where we see the throne room of Heaven, a sealed scroll, and the Lamb who is worthy to open it. This kicks off everything that comes after it, and will be where we start our deep dive next week.



The First Cycle

The first cycle of seven emphasizes that the followers of Christ have been delivered, as well as the strife and conflict among mankind in these last days.

1. The First Four Seals: The Four Horsemen (6:1-8)
2. The Fifth Seal: Suffering of the Saints (6:9-11)
3. The Sixth Seal: The End: Its Terror Described (6:12-17)
4. Interlude: God's People Preserved in Suffering (7)
 - a. The 144,000: The Church Militant
 - b. The Heavenly Multitude: The Church Triumphant
5. The Seventh Seal: The End: An Answer to the Prayers of the Saints (8:1-5)

The Second Cycle

The second cycle of seven emphasizes that the message of Christ is to be proclaimed throughout the world throughout the trials of the last days.

1. The First Four Trumpet Blasts: Tribulations in Nature. (8:6-13)
2. The Fifth Trumpet Blast: Evil From the Abyss. (9:1-12)
3. The Sixth Trumpet Blast: Destruction Sweeps Over Mankind. (9:13-21)
4. Interlude: God's Word Still Proclaimed (10-11)
 - a. John is re-commissioned
 - b. The Saints Witness
6. The Seventh Trumpet Blast: The End and Rejoicing.

The Interlude

Like the two cycles before this point, the book itself is interrupted by an interlude, focusing on the cosmic struggle between Christ and Satan.

1. The Woman, Child, and Pursuing Dragon. (12)
2. The Dragon Marshals His Forces (13)
 - a. The Beast from the Sea
 - b. The Beast from the Earth
4. The Conquering Lamb and the 144,000 on Mt. Zion. (14:1-5)
5. Defeat of the Dragon and his Beasts Prophesied. (14:6-13)
6. Vision of the Harvest and the End. (14:14-20)

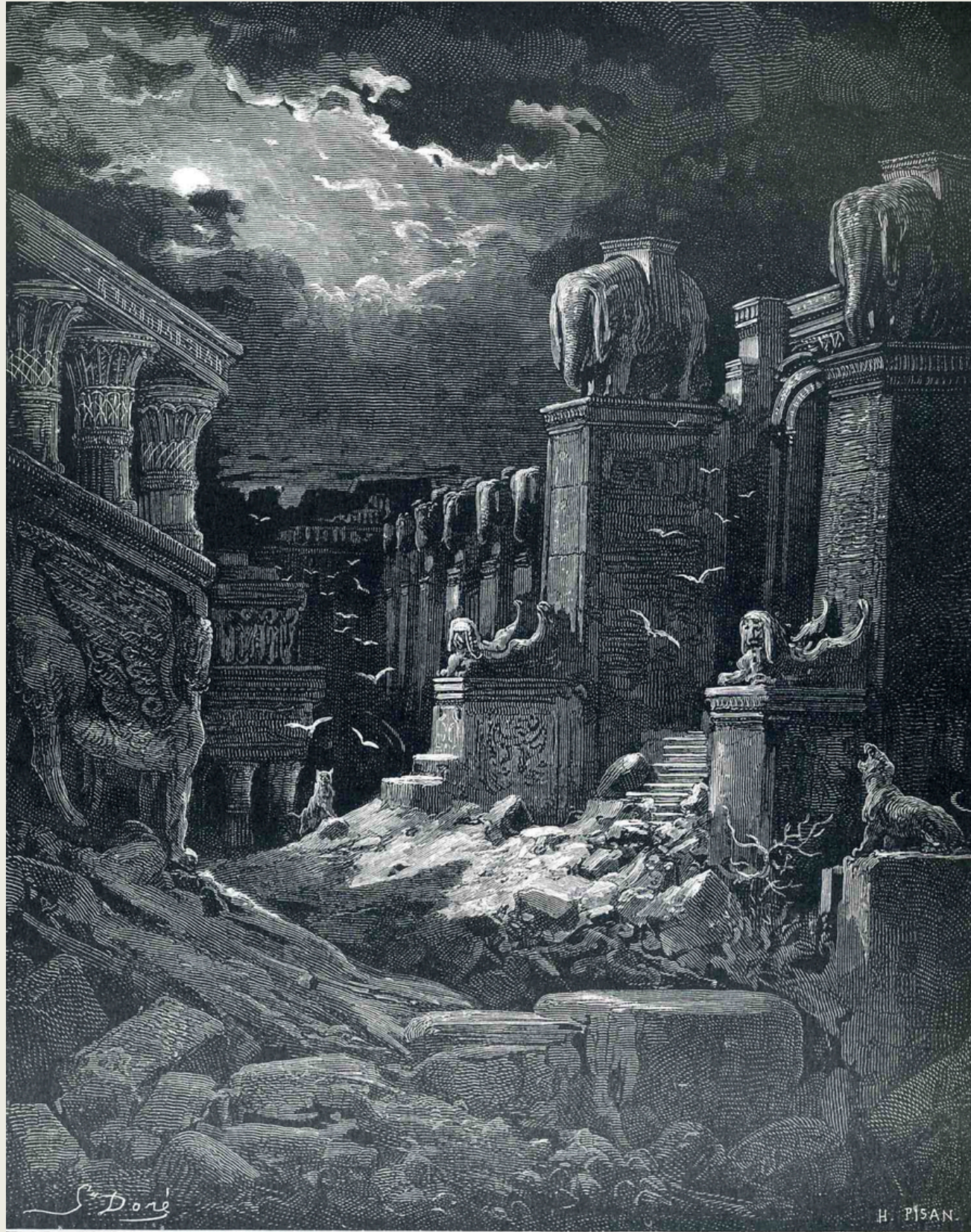
The Third Cycle

The third cycle of seven shows a great, cosmic recapitulation of the Exodus, with God delivering His people from bondage in the fallen world.

1. The New Song by the Sea. (15)
2. The First Six Bowls of God's Wrath. (16:1-16)
3. The Seventh Bowl: The End. (16:17-21)



The Passage through the Red Sea, a print by James G. S. Lucas, c.1831



The End

Finally, we focus on the end, on the judgment and glory of Jesus Christ, again broken into three sections.

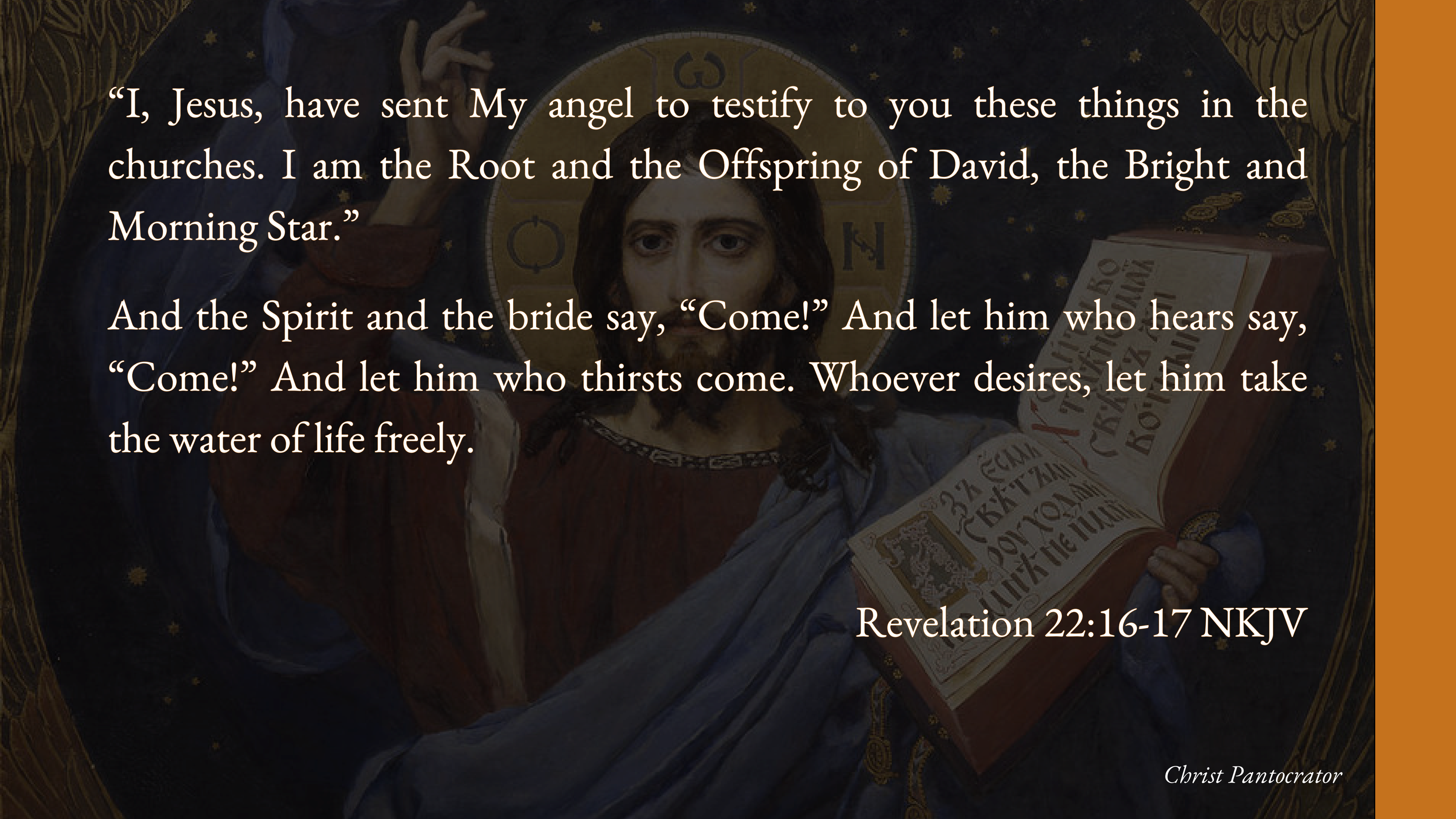
1. The Fall of Babylon, the Whore.
 - a. Judgment of the Harlot. (17)
 - b. The Fall of Babylon. (18)
 - c. The Song of Victory (19:1-10)
2. The Conquering Christ
 - a. The White Rider conquers the beasts (19:11-21)
 - b. The Defeat of Satan (20:1-10)
 - c. The Dead and Death judged (20:11-15)
3. The Glory of Jerusalem, the Bride (21:1-22:5)

Babylon Fallen by Gustave Dore

What's the Point?

Through the entire book of Revelation, we are meant to recognize two things. First, in this world, we are going to suffer. Second, we can take heart, for Jesus has overcome this world. The scenes in the book consistently reveal God's sovereign power, His victory over evil, and His steadfast love for those who trust in Him. The book is not a roadmap or tea leaves so we will recognize the end times. We are already in them. Rather, God gave us the Apocalypse of S. John that we might have trouble in our trials and tribulations, always remembering that the Lamb who was slain has achieved ultimate victory for each of us.



A detailed icon of Christ Pantocrator, the Christ of All, seated and holding a large open book with Cyrillic script. He has long dark hair and a beard, and is wearing a red tunic under a blue mantle. His right hand is raised in a gesture of blessing. The background is dark blue with gold stars and a circular halo with Greek letters. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent dark blue layer.

“I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.”

And the Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.

Revelation 22:16-17 NKJV

Christ Pantocrator

Further Reading

- *The Concordia Commentary on Revelation* by Louis Brighton
- *The Book of Revelation* by G. K. Beale
- *A Theology of Revelation* by J. Scott Duvall
- *Revelation: Four Views: A Parallel Commentary*, edited by Steve Gregg
- *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* by Richard Bauckham
- *Visions of the Apocalypse* by Bruce Chilton
- *Revelation: Reformation Heritage Bible Commentary* by Mark Brighton
- *Christ and the Caesars* by Ethelbert Stauffer



Questions?