THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The American Civil War was a fierce battle of ideologies. The North’s opposition to slavery clashed with the South’s determination to preserve its plantation-dependent economy, which ignited a brutal conflict in 1861 that raged for four years. Each side was fortified by their deep-seated beliefs, making the war not only a physical confrontation but also a battle for America’s foundational ideologies. The turning point in this bloody conflict was the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. This battle marked the beginning of the end for the South and led to their eventual surrender to the North in 1865.

As time on this earth draws to a close, biblical prophecy depicts an ever-increasing polarization between the two forces in the great controversy. The two fundamentally opposed belief systems are gearing up to clash in the final showdown. One side adheres to the principle of selflessness—God’s way of ensuring freedom and love—while the other observes an ideology centered on self and resulting in bondage to sin. All people will soon have to choose a side. At the very end, Satan will employ every tactic possible to deceive humanity one last time, directing them to persecute God’s faithful few. This is the pivotal turning point, the beginning of the end. During that time, when it seems that Satan is about to take control of the entire planet, God will turn the tide. A last warning and invitation will go out to people across the earth as Babylon falls and the faithful share the gospel with renewed power. It will be a victorious but difficult time for God’s people.
Write out Revelation 13, 14 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Revelation 14:6–12. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
THE FINAL CONTEST

The tension between Christ and Satan will build toward a final contest in the last days of earth's history. Using the imagery of beasts, Revelation 13 depicts two major religiopolitical players that will work in tandem to intimidate and persecute God's faithful people in the days leading up to Jesus' return. A beast in Bible prophecy represents a kingdom (Dan. 7:23). The first beast represents an ecclesiastical superpower that gains both political and religious power over the people. During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church—the most powerful structure at the time—declared the pope to be the supreme religious and civil authority. The church hierarchy founded cruel organizations such as the Inquisition to relentlessly punish anyone who disagreed with their ideologies and practices. For centuries, the Catholic Church wielded the kind of religious and political dominance described in the first beast of Revelation 13. Though it currently holds significantly less power, the Papacy will regain its near-universal sway in the last days.

The second beast of Revelation 13 represents the last superpower in the Biblical lineup of global powers given in Daniel and Revelation. This nation will use its worldwide influence to deceive the whole world into false worship just prior to the second coming of Jesus. At first, the second beast appears lamblike (i.e., mild and Christlike), but eventually it “speaks as a dragon,” enforcing the mandatory worship of the first beast and penalizing those who won't comply. The nation is seen arising from the earth rather than the sea, meaning this nation arises in a less populated area of the world (Rev. 13:11; 17:15). The United States of America emerged in a wilderness compared to the crowded countries of the Old World. America pioneered a new form of government that was established on protestant and republican principles—no pope and no monarchy. The nation's founding documents protect religious liberty, separation of church and state, and freedom of speech, among other various human rights. These ideals are lamblike in many ways, but the Bible predicts that these noble principles will give way to old forms of religious tyranny. The nation that speaks as a dragon will resume ancient persecutions and build an image to the beast, compelling all to acknowledge their authority and join in their worship. “The ‘image to the beast' represents that form of apostate Protestantism which will be developed when the Protestant churches shall seek the aid of the civil power for the enforcement of their dogmas” (Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy [1911], 445). The church will again gain control over the state for its own purposes, producing an “image,” or imitation, of the church-state union that characterized the Papacy during the Middle Ages.

Economic sanctions will be placed on those who resist “the mark of the beast” (Rev. 13:17). Though this mark won't be on the right hand or forehead (v. 16) literally, it will identify those who comply with the law governing religion—a law that will be instituted by the United States and eventually enforced globally. Adherence to this law will pay homage to the Papacy and will be the visible manifestation (cont. on p. 101)
THE FINAL WARNING

The *RMS Titanic*, a luxurious cruise ship hailed as “unsinkable,” embarked on its maiden voyage in early 1912. As we modern readers know, however, it met its doom in the icy North Atlantic. Iceberg warnings from other ships, including a crucial one from the nearby *SS Californian*, flooded the message room. However, the *Titanic’s* operators, inundated with distracting passenger messages, brushed off the urgent warnings. The dire message never reached the captain, and just an hour later, the *Titanic* struck the infamous iceberg. Chaos ensued, emergency procedures having been forgotten. Half-empty lifeboats launched into the freezing night. Over 1,500 people were lost to the icy depths that night.

Like the passengers on the *Titanic*, people in this world feel safe and secure while the planet hurtles straight for disaster. In the final moments of earth’s history, and under enormous societal pressure, God’s people are obligated to proclaim the final warnings to a world destined for doom. Revelation 14’s three angels’ messages are God’s final warning to the world. Revelation 18:1 promises an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to accompany this warning in an unprecedented way. The church will present the everlasting gospel to the world, uplifting the crucified Savior and elevating God as the Creator worthy of our worship. Like the final burst of rain before the harvest, the Holy Spirit will be poured out on the church, granting her prophetic authority to share the biblical evidence that there is no more time to lose. The investigative judgment is almost over; salvation’s door is soon to be shut.

As Sunday keeping becomes the accepted norm, the Sabbath will become a peculiar sign of both God’s faithfulness to us and of ours to Him. This includes its deeper significance as the seal of God’s covenant in a believer’s life. Babylon, a prophesied system of religious confusion, will become more and more corrupt, but its sins and lies will be exposed. In a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit that surpasses even Pentecost, God’s people will call all true believers out of Babylon and into the lifeboat, which is the remnant group who keep God’s commandments.

During this time, true believers will illuminate the earth with God’s glory. Their conduct, faithfulness, message, and Spirit-filled lives will testify to the entire planet that God is love. Meanwhile, the world will be drowning in a sea of satanic distractions, falsehoods, and trickery. “Spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth” (Rev. 16:14) will create false revivals, appear as deceased loved ones, and use any other possible deception to unite the religious and political world against God’s remnant. Satan will lead the charge by transforming “into an angel of light” (2 Cor. 11:14) and even pretending to be Jesus (Matt. 24:26). The lost will brush off the divine warnings until nothing more can be done. “He who is unjust, let him be unjust still;... he who is righteous, let him be righteous still” (Rev. 22:11). Salvation’s door will close.

Prophecy indicates that all these things are soon to come upon us. What matters today is knowing Christ, loving Christ, and sharing Christ with others. Nothing should take priority over a genuine walk with Him.
What relationship do the following verses have with Revelation 13, 14?

Revelation 18:1–4  
Daniel 7:8, 20, 24, 25  
Revelation 7:1–4  
Matthew 24:24  
2 Thessalonians 2:3–10  
2 Timothy 3:1–9  
Zechariah 10:1  
Isaiah 60:1–3

(Cont. from inGest, p. 99):

of the inward attitude of self-reliance and self-worship. This law will force people to keep a counterfeit Sabbath—a day backed by nothing but human tradition. Sunday keeping stands in direct violation of the fourth commandment and is a distinct mark of papal tradition and authority. The church of Rome openly changed God’s Word and thereby declared itself above God.

Rejecting God’s chosen holy day in favor of man’s indicates a mindset that runs much deeper. Just like an iceberg that has 90 percent of its mass hidden beneath the surface, Sunday keeping will become a visible manifestation of someone who willfully chooses falsehood over God’s Word of truth, reliance on self over trust in God, and salvation by works over salvation by grace. That said, simply going to church on Saturday and knowing the end-time prophecies will not be enough to pass the test. What matters most is a personal, transforming relationship with Jesus that continues to grow every day.
In 1915, the Endurance, an Antarctic exploration ship, became stuck in the merciless Antarctic ice, which eventually crushed it and forced the crew into lifeboats. Stranded on the freezing water, the twenty-seven men looked to Ernest Shackleton, their expedition leader, for direction in the crisis. He rallied his crew and implemented the best plan he could think of: Leaving the remains of the Endurance behind, they set out toward Elephant Island, the nearest dry land. This desolate rock supplied some basic provisions but offered no rescue, however, as it was and still is essentially uninhabitable. Shackleton and five others then ventured approximately eight hundred miles across infamously stormy waters to South Georgia Island, where their expedition had originally begun and where an inhabited whaling station stood. Battling hurricane-force winds and monstrous waves, truly against all odds, they miraculously arrived more or less unharmed. Exhausted but undeterred, Shackleton traversed icy mountains to reach the station, and four months later, rescued his remaining crew from Elephant Island. No lives were lost.

Throughout history, Jesus’ followers have had to deal with difficult circumstances, persecution, and seemingly insurmountable challenges. God’s end-time remnant people are the final targets of Satan’s hatred. How are we to withstand such an intense onslaught from the enemy?

Revelation highlights God’s people “who come out of the great tribulation” (Rev. 7:14, emphasis added). This description alone provides hope for all who are anxious about the last days. Jesus’ faithful will make it out! Revelation promises that a group of believers called the 144,000 will stand their ground through the last test. Though there’s some debate over whether this number is symbolic or literal, the fact remains that it represents a group of people who stay faithful to God until the end. According to Revelation, this group has three defining characteristics: they “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:14), “were not defiled with women” (Rev. 14:4), and “follow the Lamb wherever He goes” (Rev. 14:4).

The people who will be found faithful at His second coming are those who have an ongoing relationship with Christ in the here and now. By their faith in Jesus’ sacrifice, they receive pardon for their sins and the power to overcome. They remain steadfast in clinging to the biblical truth and undefiled by secular ideas, popular philosophies, and deceptive teachings, which are sometimes very appealing. Lastly, but most importantly, they follow and look to Jesus, their Leader, every day and every hour. Through the frozen wilderness of this sinful world, across the stormy waters of trials, through the hurricanes of persecution and seasons of desolation, their eyes remain fixed on Christ. Wherever He goes, they go. Whatever He promises, they claim. Jesus is their Captain, Leader, and Savior. Their characters reflect His, and their lives of faithfulness will be rewarded with the seal of God. He will return soon to rescue His people. No one on His side will be lost. It’s up to us to choose whether we’ll be delivered or not.
The Sabbath will be the great test of loyalty, for it is the point of truth especially controverted. When the final test shall be brought to bear upon men, then the line of distinction will be drawn between those who serve God and those who serve Him not. While the observance of the false sabbath in compliance with the law of the state, contrary to the fourth commandment, will be an avowal of allegiance to a power that is in opposition to God, the keeping of the true Sabbath, in obedience to God’s law, is an evidence of loyalty to the Creator. While one class, by accepting the sign of submission to earthly powers, receive the mark of the beast, the other, choosing the token of allegiance to divine authority, receive the seal of God.” (Ellen G. White, The Great Controversy [1911], 605.)

“Thus the message of the third angel will be proclaimed. As the time comes for it to be given with greatest power, the Lord will work through humble instruments, leading the minds of those who consecrate themselves to His service. The laborers will be qualified rather by the unction of His Spirit than by the training of literary institutions. Men of faith and prayer will be constrained to go forth with holy zeal, declaring the words which God gives them. The sins of Babylon will be laid open. The fearful results of enforcing the observances of the church by civil authority, the inroads of spiritualism, the stealthy but rapid progress of the papal power—all will be unmasked. By these solemn warnings the people will be stirred.” (Ibid., 606.)

“The great work of the gospel is not to close with less manifestation of the power of God than marked its opening. The prophecies which were fulfilled in the outpouring of the former rain at the opening of the gospel are again to be fulfilled in the latter rain at its close.” (Ibid., 611, 612.)

“Servants of God, with their faces lighted up and shining with holy consecration, will hasten from place to place to proclaim the message from heaven. By thousands of voices, all over the earth, the warning will be given. Miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and signs and wonders will follow the believers. Satan also works, with lying wonders, even bringing down fire from heaven in the sight of men. Revelation 13:13. Thus the inhabitants of the earth will be brought to take their stand.” (Ibid., 612.)

“A decree will finally be issued against those who hallow the Sabbath of the fourth commandment, denouncing them as deserving of the severest punishment and giving the people liberty, after a certain time, to put them to death. Romanism in the Old World and apostate Protestantism in the New will pursue a similar course toward those who honor all the divine precepts.

“The people of God will then be plunged into those scenes of affliction and distress described by the prophet as the time of Jacob's trouble. ‘Thus saith the Lord: We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace... All faces are turned into paleness. Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it.’ Jeremiah 30:5–7.” (Ibid., 615, 616.)
inQuire

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why is keeping the Sabbath versus Sunday about so much more than just a day?

How should we prepare for when the mark of the beast will be enforced?

Why should we not wait until the latter rain falls to engage in evangelism?

How can we learn faithfulness today, especially in the small things?

Have you seen church and state mingling in recent years?

How can we guard against feeling spiritually superior to those who keep Sunday instead of Sabbath?

What’s the Holy Spirit’s role in character transformation and evangelism?

What are some ways the importance of a healthy relationship with Jesus be better integrated into our evangelistic preaching on prophecies?

How does the final contest reveal some of the core issues of the great controversy?