

Sermon to the Saints which are at Topeka, Kansas -- Sunday, February 22, 2015.

The Church. That is the subject matter of this sermon, which has been framed by a zeal placed upon me to fulfill my duty as articulated in Peter's first epistle:

"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:" (1 Peter 3:15)

In March and April of 2014, our brother Steve prepared two wonderful sermons treating the subject of the Church in her many essential components for the edification of this body as currently constituted, as well as any who the Lord our God might grant light to the acknowledging of the truth regarding this most glorious of entities. I have included for your reference (by e-mail) these two pieces of work, and they are available on our website for March 30th and April 6th of last year.

The Church: Fair as the moon -- indeed with the moon at her feet! Clear as the Sun -- no mixture of confusion or darkness whatsoever, cuz she's clothed with the brightness of the Son of God! TERRIBLE! Sending the very same chills down the spines of feckless earth dwellers brought about by a marching army, two hundred billion strong -- battle banners fluttering in a brisk, Southerly wind.

"the LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a king is among them." (Numbers 23:21)

When you consider the duties to practical divinity articulated about this amazing little mystery that has populated the earth from time in memorial, there is no difficulty in seeing what is and what is not a Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, for what saith the Scripture?

"Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity." (2 Timothy 2:19)

When you consider the metaphoric superlatives written about this creation of God's, the energized spirit soars to heights nearly unfit for the human flesh, even as our beloved brother Paul articulated when he saw a glimpse of the heavenly realm, to wit:

"How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter. ... And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure." (2 Corinthians 12:4, 7)

These things Paul heard and saw, when caught up into paradise, were beyond human articulation and placed him at risk of being haughty and high-minded ... and they were things pertaining to this subject about which this sermon was prepared: The Church!

There are 115 verses -- all in the New Testament -- wherein a variant of this English word "church" is used. Each time, the Greek word translated is "ekklesia". "Ek-klay-see'-ah". This word is just unique enough to be easily burned into the memory of every young one here today. You should say it over and over and over again,

until you never hear the word "church" again without two things happening: First, you know for positive certain that the word "church" is only properly to be used to express "Ek-klay-see'-ah", or not to be used at all; second, you feel a boiling indignity toward any and every person who would dare to use it for anything but an "Ek-klay-see'-ah"!

The linguists provide the various uses for the word in common vernacular. That is, when people in the world use the word "church", they mean a whole lot of different things -- usually evident in the context of the word's usage. But the Holy Ghost is not "people". Every time the Holy Ghost inspires an apostle to make use of this word in reference to the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the definite article limiting adjective "the" is used. The Church! That is because the word "ekklesia", in its pure and unadulterated form comes from a combination of two words: "Called" and "Out"! As in:

"Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you," (2 Corinthians 6:17)

and

"And I heard another voice from heaven, saying, Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues." (Revelation 18:4)

Nothing but "the Church" of the Lord Jesus Christ is made up of individuals who are "called out"! Every series of epistles written to New Testament churches identified the recipients of the epistles as "called". The only conclusion that can be legitimately drawn from this simple and profound bit of truth is that the only persons who will be members of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ are those about whom Paul wrote these words:

"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." (Romans 8:29-30)

So any sincere discussion about the Church is about that beautiful collection of souls in each generation who are the called of God from eternity past. Since Steve has provided a solid discussion of the practical divinity -- that is how the members of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ should conduct their affairs while in the earth -- I encourage you to consume again those words so that what I provide for you will have the more value. Certainly, without repeating his work, the view of the Church under discussion today -- and if the Lord tarries and is willing, next week -- requires a clear understanding of what the Church is, and Steve's labor will help you attain unto that understanding.

I will be making an examination of the Church in eschatology. The primary text of my treatment of this glorious subject matter is found in the twelfth chapter of Revelation. Only 17 verses in length, this part of John the Seer's inspired writing establishes a framing of just why it is such a matter of importance and urgency -- if you will allow me some latitude for analysis -- of knowing exactly what the Church is and what the Church must be doing, for;

"Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?" (2 Peter 3:11-12)

So, let us begin with a first pass over the passage under consideration, parsed out for more in depth discussion to provide some prophetic edification.

[1] "And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:

[2] And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

[3] And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.

[4] And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days.

[5] And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

[6] And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.

[7] ¶ Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time. And when the dragon saw that he was cast unto the earth, he persecuted the woman which brought forth the man child.

[8] And to the woman were given two wings of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness, into her place, where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent. And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." (Revelation 12)

The context of this scene -- within the structure of the Apocalyptic timeline -- is upon the sounding of the seventh trumpet -- for as certainly as we find this sounding event being just introduced:

"And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever." (Revelation 11:15)

We find at the closing of the amazing wonders we are presently discussing the reminder:

"And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ:" (Revelation 12:10)

Further, we are told in the plainest language that the subject matter of this book is:

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass; and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John:" (Revelation 1:1)

While the whole of this 22 chapters relate to the times immediately leading to, including, and relevantly following the revealing of Christ in His act of redeeming the purchased possession -- that is, taking His kingdom -- we must recognize that within that scope is the period at which Christ is physically revealed; which we know is articulated in Scripture as being associated with the sounding of this seventh and final trumpet:

"And the LORD shall be seen over them, and his arrow shall go forth as the lightning: and the Lord GOD shall blow the trumpet, and shall go with whirlwinds of the south." (Zechariah 9:14)

...

"Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed." (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

...

"For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:" (1 Thessalonians 4:16)

So, it is important that whatever we do with the language contained in this passage, it cannot be without the plainest understanding that this unique vision relates to the coming of Christ in power and glory. And I say "unique vision", because for the first time in this book of Revelation -- which many expositors treat as though filled with chiefly metaphoric descriptions, rather than plain articulations of actual events that John the Revelator was given to see would be coming in this era -- I say for the first time, we actually have John using the Greek word "semeion" (say-mi'-on), which means "a sign, mark, token".

The woman, which appears in the skies in John's vision -- though just a short time later in and on the earth -- is described as

"clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:" (Revelation 12:1)

I have found no exposition of this passage that does not hold forth that this woman represents the Church, as I suspect each of you sitting here this morning has already concluded both in your personal examinations of this passage, and certainly since I have articulated that the subject matter of my sermon is the Church. It is not enough, however, to simply say that this is the Church here represented; because such a conclusion might raise as many questions as it would answer, once you have locked that color in on this eschatological Rubik's Cube, including:

- 1) If she be the Church, what then of this state of late-stage pregnancy?
- 2) If she be the Church, who then is this man child?
- 3) If she be the Church redeemed at the coming of Christ, why then is she taken into the wilderness?
- 4) If she be the Church, who is this remnant of her seed, with whom this dragon continues to make war?

So, without getting a conception of this woman and her state there can be no proper understanding of what she represents, particularly in a way that gives this iteration of the Church gathered in this house on this day a clearer sense of the beauty and excellence of this body, and her duties in preparation for that coming apocalypse.

The last time I was granted the honor of speaking to this group of souls was at the marriage of Jacob and Katherine, last December. Then I gave some bit of a picture of our duty to one another, and to Christ our spiritual "husband", to keep our love evergreen, our charity perpetual and scriptural. I made reference then to the great love song written to express the affection between Christ -- the King whose revelation that our text has relation to -- and His bride the Church -- the woman whose state of eminence and imminent parturition we are examining this morning. It should be no mystery, then, that we can look to this same love song to read about this same woman, in this same state she is found at the opening of Revelation 12.

The Song of Solomon is a treatment, I believe, of the relationship between Christ and the Church from its origins through to its fruition. The language -- which has been so cheaply prostituted by the profane of the earth -- is superlative and still brutally accurate when displaying the fickle nature of Christ's bride due to that indwelling sin of her members. Yet, she reaches a state of perfection -- having been infused with her Husband's affection and effectual graces, exercised through millennia filled with conflict with Satan. And while to embark upon a solitary exposition of that song is yet as daunting to me as to unpack the chapters of Zechariah with precision -- I simply do not have sufficient light and dare not presume to meddle beyond that to which I have attained -- some of this blessed work shines brightly and can be confidently consumed and shared.

One of those passages is found in the sixth chapter, within the first two oracles there. Serving as the crescendo of this passage is a verse -- frequently quoted in this house through the years, and yet not completely -- that parallels the opening of this part of Revelation:

"¶ Whither is thy beloved gone, O thou fairest among women? whither is thy beloved turned aside? that we may seek him with thee. My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the beds of spices, to feed in the

gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine: he feedeth among the lilies. (Song 6:1-3)

I break here, as this is the close of the first of the two oracles, and it bears mentioning that this word here used "lilies" has a twofold joyfulness for us today. First, it is the name given to one of our sweet little ones by her God-fearing parents, who has just had her birthday. Second, it has a very relevant meaning in this context. The word "shuwshan" (shoo-shan) -- where, believe it or not, we get the name "Susan" or "Suzanna" -- means "exultation" or "rejoicing". In context, this scene set here is the Bride acknowledging that Christ is feeding His flock with exultations and rejoicing -- very similar to the context immediately preceding Revelation 12.

"¶ Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners. Turn away thine eyes from me, for they have overcome me: thy hair is as a flock of goats that appear from Gilead. Thy teeth are as a flock of sheep which go up from the washing, whereof every one beareth twins, and there is not one barren among them. As a piece of a pomegranate are thy temples within thy locks. There are threescore queens, and fourscore concubines, and virgins without number. My dove, my undefiled is but one; she is the only one of her mother, she is the choice one of her that bare her. The daughters saw her, and blessed her; yea, the queens and the concubines, and they praised her. Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?" (Song 6:4-10)

This language describing the Church as bearing forth such refinement -- such exquisiteness -- is not hyperbole. There was a time when the Children of Israel -- those with whom God made a covenant which he has declared will be finally fulfilled -- were described as possessing a "perfection of beauty". Jeremiah laments that they fell from it with this language:

"All that pass by clap their hands at thee; they hiss and wag their head at the daughter of Jerusalem, saying, Is this the city that men call The perfection of beauty, The joy of the whole earth?" (Lamentations 2:15)

But there is a time prophesied -- in a psalm of Asaph -- when that beauty returns:

"The mighty God, even the LORD, hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined. Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence: a fire shall devour before him, and it shall be very tempestuous round about him. He shall call to the heavens from above, and to the earth, that he may judge his people. Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice. And the heavens shall declare his righteousness: for God is judge himself. Selah." (Psalms 50:1-6)

For now, I provide that prophesy for purposes of underscoring the context. The beauty of the Church becomes perfected! The husband, having fed His flock -- His people -- His Bride -- in pastures of rejoicing and exultation, has espied her perfected beauty. She has reached the point of spiritual maturation -- simultaneous to His triumphant return to take His Kingdom -- and having reached it, she has distinctly beautiful characteristics that uniquely prepare her for what is at hand. This is why, in the love song, she is introduced at this critical time precipice:

"Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, ...?" (Song 6:10)

Who is this beautiful creature -- who has distinguished herself among all the other women (religions, if you will); be they queens, concubines, or virgins -- that ushers in a scene of dayspring?

"We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:" (2 Peter 1:19)

This day dawning, of course, is none other than the return of our Christ in glory, which beautifully weaves another eschatological three-verse oracle into this scene to help us to understand why this woman is "clothed with the sun", to wit:

"For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts." (Malachi 4:1-3)

As the natural sun serves as the greatest source of natural light, the Word is the source of all spiritual light, and in this luminous vision wraps or clothes the Church in resplendent radiance. This Word -- the presence of which rids the need for sun or moon or any other light to exist in our heavenly residence -- has its perfection in the purest of doctrine. As Christ says:

"If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light." (Luke 11:36)

So, the Shulamite bride in the love song is said to be "clear as the sun", she being in that blessed hour possessed of Christ's returning countenance:

"And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength." (Revelation 1:16)

The examination of the timeframe and the glories of the Sun of Righteousness that encloses the Church in this most amazing hour is marvelous to contemplate. There are yet two introductory characteristics that deserve consideration, so that we might the better understand what will be the nature of this woman in so cataclysmic a period in the future: The moon and the stars -- or as the Song states it:

"fair as the moon, ... and terrible as an army with banners" (Song 6:10)

The Church will be presented forth upon the Return of Christ -- in the form of a body of believers whose activities in the earth will be distinctly relevant to the seething and final battle for Kingship; a battle declared to be possessing heavenly and earthly components. That conflict will be discussed further in our treatment of this chapter. In her presentation, the Church will be clothed with the brightness of the sun -- or the everlasting Word. But she herself -- within the clothing of her husband's garments -- is "fair as the moon" over which she is presented as conqueror; it being "under her feet". The moon representing the same character in each of these passages, the distinction is the perspective from which it is viewed.

The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is the fairest of all human institutions for her beauty.

"My heart is inditing a good matter: I speak of the things which I have made touching the king: my tongue is the pen of a ready writer. Thou art fairer than the children of men: grace is poured into thy lips: therefore God hath blessed thee for ever." (Psalms 45:1-2)

The words in both passages intimate a purity, or "white-ness", as the beauty of the moon is in its paleness in the night sky. As is the character of those to whom God has shown mercy, they seek to purify themselves in their daily walk, striving against sin and maintaining and defending gospel truth. It is said of those who are among the great multitude before the throne, victoriously crying with loud voices in praise of the Lamb:

"These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:14)

The people of God -- members of this body under our consideration, and in the direct context of this perfecting of beauty -- are instructed:

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." (Hebrews 10:22-25)

Having done this work, through what many of us have referred to as "the daisy chain" toward spiritual perfection, to wit:

"And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity." (2 Peter 1:5-7)

Having done this work, there are two perspectives from which this Church membership standing in the earth at the sounding of the seventh trumpet can be viewed: One, that the spiritual perfection -- reflecting the bright light of Christ as the moon reflects the sun -- radiates, making her "fair as the moon". Two, that this work of striving against those forces of darkness that resulted in the spiritual perfection -- and I do NOT mean sinless perfection -- allows the Church to be seen as having put that "earthly, sensual, devilish" condition under her feet.

The final of these three opening characteristics of the Church in Revelation 12 -- ***"upon her head a crown of twelve stars"*** -- and the twice repeated character of the same woman in Song 6 -- ***"terrible as an army with banners"*** -- is that of conquering royalty!

Much has been said in the expositors about the number of stars in the crown. Whether these be indicative of the twelve tribes of Israel, or the twelve apostles as expositors suggest is intimated:

"And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matthew 19:28),

it is more relevant to consider that she is wearing a crown of royalty which most assuredly depicts the symmetry of the two dispensations, and aligns with the gates and foundations of the city which represents this bride of Christ for eternity, to wit:

"And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and shewed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; And had a wall great and high, and had twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and names written thereon, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb." (Revelation 21:2, 10-14)

Clearly in the context of our passage, this is a woman of nobility -- as her members are made kings and priests unto God -- and she is in active warfare! This warfare, having reached a state where the usurper is confronted with the returning Christ, is at its pitch. Properly cloaked with the armor of God, this noble band of humble Church members is seen veritably by His Majesty the Devil as "terrible as an army with banners"! Remember, my dear friends here today, the words of Christ to the Church in Philadelphia:

"Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." (Revelation 3:10-11)

Christ having fresh come ... and the battle pitched ... and the Bride of Christ -- pregnant with the man-child and in great pains to be delivered -- standing at the very precipice of the final conflict in the human experience, we now have a clear picture of what we must be prepared for as we consider how we must strive to reach that state of spiritual perfection in this body. Not the body of Christ's Bride that occupied in the centuries and millennia gone by -- for that is not this woman in Revelation 12. We're seeing the Church in the final days of conflict before the restitution of all things. We're seeing the church clothed with the sun of God! The moon under her feet, shining with the glow of great tribulation she has accomplished! Her royalty established, her throne and seed at risk! Be aware, my dear friends, of Christ's comforting words:

"Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name." (Revelation 3:12)

The stage of this conflict having been set -- there is much else to learn about this amazing "wonder" that was revealed to our brother John. I submit that what I am able to prepare for you today will pale in comparison to the things that we will understand as we rapidly close this human experience -- a grotesquely and deeply corrupted generation that cannot proceed much farther before we are at that point about which our Christ

warned us -- as it was in the days of Noah. The inspired words of the prophets of old have yet to be found as anything except perfectly precise.

Next week, I will continue this view of the Church in her final years of earthly tabernacle. What we do today must be viewed through the lens of where we will be shortly. Once the trigger is tripped ... the trap will spring ... and it will be short work getting to this day about which I am talking. Consider the words:

"When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)" (Matthew 24:15)

This abomination is very nearly -- in every legal, political, social, and practical sense -- upon us. Then in rapid sequence -- bang ... bang ... bang ... events begin to unfold across the globe, and then these words:

"And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven: and then shall all the tribes of the earth mourn, and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." (Matthew 24:30-31)

With the help of the Holy Ghost, and the mercies of our God, I will hope to help you see how the events of Revelation 12 fold into this prophetic language used by Christ. We must be prepared, because the Church -- I fully expect this Church -- will be in that vanguard. I hope what I've shared with you today will be a helpful beginning, and I am very thankful for the blessing of feeding this flock.

I love you all most dearly.

Amen.