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# We Have Something of Heaven

## *A Theology of Joy in Revelation*

Brian J. Tabb\*

All is not right in our world and in our lives. This reality confronts us afresh every time we listen to the daily news report, open our email, or look in the mirror. The nations continue to rage. The wicked prosper and the righteous languish. Our loved ones get sick and die. Our friends disappoint us. Our bodies deteriorate, our hearts grow discouraged, and our daily struggle against sin seems like a losing effort. Sometimes—especially in Minnesota, where I live—it seems like it’s “always winter and never Christmas.”<sup>1</sup> Enmity and pain, thorns and thistles, dust to dust—the effects of Adam’s sin still endure east of Eden.

We lament and weep in the present, but we also love and laugh and rejoice. Life is more than rainy days, hospital visits, and funerals. We attend weddings and baby showers. We enjoy the company of dear friends, celebrate birthdays with filet mignon, and savor apple pie à la mode with family gathered for holidays. We cheer when our team wins the championship. We marvel when we hear Mozart’s Jupiter Symphony. These are all common-grace joys that believers and nonbelievers alike experience, and they point to the goodness of God’s creation and his kindness to his creatures.<sup>2</sup> But we know that every colorful sunset and delicious apple pie is a pointer to God, the one who made the sun and fruit trees and gave us eyes and hands and taste buds to enjoy these gifts. Christians grasp

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1 C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, repr. ed., *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 20.

2 See Gen. 1:31; Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17; 1 Tim. 4:4.

the essential biblical truth that *the Lord himself* is chief object of our joy; *he alone* satisfies our weary souls with his steadfast love and goodness.<sup>3</sup>

### PRESENT SADNESS, FUTURE GLADNESS

The prophets spoke expectantly of the future joy God's people would experience when God comes to save them. Isaiah expresses clearly this hope of end-time joy:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus; it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. . . . Say to those who have an anxious heart, "Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; in the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. . . . And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (Isa. 35:1–10)

Here Isaiah speaks of what God *will* do and how his people—and all creation—will respond. Yet the Scriptures repeatedly contrast our *future* gladness and our *present* sadness. Consider these examples:

Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Ps. 30:5)

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3 See Ps. 90:14; 107:9; Jer. 31:14, 25; Phil. 3:1; 4:4.

He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him. (Ps. 126:6)

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD. . . . Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. I will feast the soul of the priests with abundance, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, declares the LORD. (Jer. 31:12–14)

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matt. 5:4)

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. (John 16:20)

What follows is an account of end-time joy. We will first define what we mean by end-time joy. Then we will consider four images of end-time joy in the book of Revelation.

#### WHAT IS END-TIME JOY?

Before going forward, it is necessary to define terms to avoid misunderstanding. Joy is generally defined as “a feeling of great pleasure and happiness.”<sup>4</sup> A survey of book titles displays an astonishing variety of proposals for what brings joy: *Joy of Cooking* (now in its ninth edition), *The Joy of Dieting* (unsurprisingly out of print), *The Joy of Sex* (with more than twelve million copies sold), *The Joy of Reading*, *The Joy of Sports*, *The Joy of Junk*, *The Joy of Less*, *The Joy of Doing Noth-*

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4 “Joy,” English Oxford Living Dictionaries, accessed 2 November 2018, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/joy>.

ing, and so on. Here we focus attention on what the Scriptures present as the chief object of our joy—joy in the Lord and in his salvation.

Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation. (Ps. 35:9)

It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isa. 25:9)

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God. (Isa. 61:10)

Yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab. 3:18)

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. (Phil. 4:4)

Thus, in this study *joy* refers to a believer’s great pleasure and happiness in God and his saving deeds.<sup>5</sup>

### *Rejoicing in the Last Days*

The qualifier *end-time* specifies *when* believers experience this joy in God. Theologians typically describe eschatology as “the study of the last things.” Many people assume that these “last things” are limited to the future end of the world and Christ’s return. However, it is more accurate to use the term *end-time* (or *eschatological*) to refer to events that take place in what the Old Testament writers call the “days to come” or “latter days,” such as when the messianic king would come

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5 John Piper similarly explains that in Philippians, “Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul, produced by the Holy Spirit, as he causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the word and in the world” (“How Do You Define Joy?” *Desiring God*, 25 July 2015, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-do-you-define-joy>).

and when God would restore Israel, send the promised Holy Spirit, judge his enemies, and establish the new covenant.<sup>6</sup>

The New Testament writers make clear that the period of the last days has begun through Jesus's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Peter declares at Pentecost, "But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And *in the last days* it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh'" (Acts 2:16–17). Similarly, the book of Hebrews begins, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but *in these last days* he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb. 1:1–2). This period of the latter days has already dawned in the past and will be consummated in the future at Jesus's return. The theological expression *inaugurated eschatology* expresses that there is both an *already* and *not yet* dimension to this period of redemptive history that begins with Christ's first coming and concludes with his second coming.<sup>7</sup>

This already–not yet understanding of the end-times informs our theology and experience in significant ways. Jesus announced that "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mark 1:15), yet he taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done" (Matt. 6:10). Our Savior died and rose again victorious, and believers "have been raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1; cf. John 5:24), yet Christians still sin and still die. We "have received the Spirit of adoption as sons," yet "we wait early for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Rom. 8:15, 23). We regularly experience this tension between the old age of sin and the new age of salvation.

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6 See Gen. 49:1; Num. 24:14; Deut. 4:30; 31:29; Isa. 2:2; Jer. 23:20; 30:3, 24; 31:31; 33:14; 48:47; 49:39; Ezek. 38:16; Dan. 10:14; Hos. 3:5; Mic. 4:1; Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; Jas. 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3.

7 For additional explanation of inaugurated eschatology, see G. K. Beale, "The End Starts at the Beginning," in Benjamin L. Gladd and Matthew S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 3–14.

*Taste of Heaven*

What then do we mean by *end-time joy*? In brief, end-time joy is a believer's great pleasure and happiness as we anticipate the fullness of our triune God's saving power and satisfying presence in the age to come and experience the foretaste of these realities even as we suffer and struggle now in the midst of the old age. Peter expresses well the tension of our already–not yet joy in suffering:

In this [salvation ready to be revealed in the last time] *you rejoice*, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and *rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory*, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Pet. 1:6–9)

Peter acknowledges the stunning glories of end-time salvation as well as the sorrow and various trials of his readers' present experience. We rejoice now *even though* we struggle and grieve and do not see our Savior face to face. This joy is not motivated by our present predicament but by our glorious future inheritance and the beauty and sufficiency of our Savior, whom we love and trust even though we don't see him with our eyes. Peter's description of this joy as "filled with glory" (ESV) or "glorious" (NIV) links it to the eschatological "glory" at Jesus's return (v. 7). Thus, "the joy believers experience is a taste of heaven, an anticipation of the end."<sup>8</sup>

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8 Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 70. Similarly Paul declares that fellow believers "are our glory and joy" now and will be "our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming" (1 Thess. 2:19–20; cf. Phil. 4:1). Paul rejoices in these saints for Christ's sake, celebrating the work that he has done, is doing, and will bring to completion in and through them when Christ returns (Phil. 1:6).

### IMAGES OF END-TIME JOY

We turn now to consider four glorious pictures of end-time joy in the book of Revelation: joy in an ultimate deliverance, a decisive victory, a spectacular wedding, and a secure home. In this book, the exalted Lord Jesus reveals symbolic visions to John “to show his servants the things that must soon take place” (1:1). These end-time visions offer a divine perspective on what is true, valuable, and lasting, which corrects and clarifies our perception of this world as it really is.<sup>9</sup> John’s visions encourage struggling saints to persevere in difficult days and warn readers to resist worldly compromise, spiritual complacency, and false teaching.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Joy in an Ultimate Deliverance*

Israel’s exodus from Egypt is the Old Testament’s signature story of salvation. The Lord hears the cries of his enslaved people and acts in accordance with his covenant with Abraham. He passes over his people while striking the Egyptians, dries up the sea, saves Israel with an outstretched arm, and leads them to the land of promise. The prophets expected the God of the exodus someday to decisively rescue his people after exile and judge their oppressors.<sup>11</sup> Revelation presents the ultimate fulfillment of this biblical hope of salvation.

The Lord does not merely deliver his people from slavery, sin, and death; he saves us to satisfy us by his presence and make us servants who carry out his purpose. Exodus 19:4–6 summarizes well this aim of the first exodus:

You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and *brought you to myself*. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, *you shall be my trea-*

9 Similarly Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, NTT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 10.

10 For an expanded treatment of the purpose of Revelation, see Brian J. Tabb, *All Things New: Revelation as Canonical Capstone*, NSBT 48 (London: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 8–9.

11 See, for example, Isa. 40:3–5; 32:1–2, 16–19; 51:9–11; Jer. 23:5–8.

*sure possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

The phrase *kingdom of priests* aptly summarizes Israel's God-given vocation to mediate Yahweh's presence, blessing, and revelation to all the nations (cf. Isa. 61:6). Revelation similarly refers to Jesus's blood-bought people as a "kingdom and priests to our God" (5:10; cf. 1:6). In both Exodus and Revelation, God's people are redeemed by sacrifice to serve him as a kingdom of priests. In Revelation 5:9–10 the heavenly worshipers sing a new song extolling Jesus as supremely worthy because he has accomplished the long-awaited new exodus deliverance of people for God from every tribe, language, and nation. Jesus has already decisively freed us from the penalty and power of our sins through his sacrificial death (1:5). He will ultimately deliver us from the presence of sin and its effects as he leads us into our eternal inheritance (21:7).

In Revelation 7:9–10, John sees an innumerable multitude standing before the throne declaring, "Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb." *Salvation* is exodus language (Ex. 14:13; 15:2), and the palm branches in these worshipers' hands recall the feast of booths, which memorialized Israel's deliverance from Egypt and anticipated their ultimate redemption after exile (Lev. 23:40–43; Zech. 14:16; cf. John 12:13).

In Revelation 15:2, John sees people "who had conquered the beast . . . standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands." These victors then "sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" (15:3).<sup>12</sup> Most likely, the victors do not sing two different songs but one great song of salvation with two great movements. The first, "the song of Moses," calls to mind the Old Testament's paradigmatic act of redemption in the exodus (see Ex. 15:1–18), while the second movement, "the song of the Lamb," celebrates the new exodus

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12 A number of commentators argue that the conjunction *kai* ("and") in Revelation 15:3 it is better translated "even" or "that is," identifying "the song of Moses" and "the song of the Lamb" as a single hymn. See, for example, G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 793; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 564.



deliverance from sin and the final victory over the beast and all God's enemies that Jesus achieves as the greater Passover Lamb. We are thus saved to sing of the Almighty's great and amazing deeds of salvation (Rev. 15:3).<sup>13</sup>

### *Joy in a Decisive Victory*

The redeemed also rejoice in God's decisive victory over his foes. In Revelation 19:1–5, a threefold hallelujah booms from heaven in response to Babylon's demise. The first two hallelujahs issue from “a great multitude in heaven,” who declare God's praises because he has judged the great prostitute Babylon and has vindicated his slain servants. They cry, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever” (19:1–3). The heavenly elders and living creatures respond, “Amen. Hallelujah!” and call God's servants to praise him (19:4–5).

*Babylon* is a rich biblical-theological designation for godless, proud human society that seeks its own glory and oppresses God's people. The name hearkens back to Nebuchadnezzar's mighty kingdom, Babylon, and its ancient namesake, Babel, where people proudly united to make a name for themselves (Gen. 11:1–9).<sup>14</sup> The great political powerhouse Rome embodied this archetypal city of man in the first century. But Rome was simply the latest in a long line of societies that boast for a time in their success and strength until their pride leads to a great fall.

This scene of heavenly exultation at Babylon's fall sharply contrasts with the scenes of powerful and wealthy people on earth lamenting as they see “the smoke of her burning” (Rev. 18:9, 18). The angel explains that Babylon “will be found no more” and highlights five things that “will be . . . no more” in the great city: the sights of craftsmen and lighted lamps, and the sounds of musicians, mills, and marriage.<sup>15</sup> This list of special and commonplace lost joys concludes appropriately with the end of weddings. Thus, Babylon the great is “a city with-

13 The beast in Revelation recalls the great vision in Daniel 7. The beast likely signifies the state's political and military power. Satan empowers the beast for a time to wage war on God's people while demanding total allegiance and even worship (13:1–8), until Jesus conquers the beast and hurls it into the lake of fire (19:20).

14 The names *Babel* and *Babylon* render the same Hebrew word, *bābel*.

15 This list alludes to Jer. 25:10 and several other Old Testament texts. For details, see Tabb, *All Things New*, 173–74.

out a bride” (18:23),<sup>16</sup> which prepares the way for the marriage supper of the Lamb (19:7) and the presentation of Jerusalem as the bejeweled Bride (21:9–11).

Following the joyous news that the Lamb’s bride is ready for the marriage supper, John sees the glorious champion—Christ, the King of kings—riding on a white horse with heaven’s armies behind him. God’s most formidable enemies have assembled for the last battle against Christ (16:12–16; 19:19). One expects a fierce fight, but instead birds are summoned to feast on the flesh of God’s foes (19:17–18), and the opponents are completely defeated (19:20–21).<sup>17</sup> Christ’s followers rejoice and take heart that their Savior is also their returning King, whose people will share in his consummate victory.

### *Joy in a Spectacular Wedding*

The heavenly exultation over Babylon’s demise (19:1–5) gives way to resounding joy because “the Lord our God the Almighty reigns” and because “the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready” (19:6–7). John stresses the loud and effusive joy of the heavenly multitude in 19:6 as he hears “the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder.” They cry, “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory” (19:7). The apostle John does not describe this scene of extravagant heavenly exultation simply to inform his readers of what will happen at the end of history but to encourage us to reflect this pattern of praise in our lives.<sup>18</sup>

The drama of the divine marriage unfolds in several phases. First, the wedding is planned, publicized, and prepared (Rev. 19:7–9). Next, the Bride is re-

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16 Lynn R. Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John’s Apocalypse*, Emory Studies in Early Christianity 10 (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 185.

17 The strange supper scene in Revelation 19:17–18 alludes to the graphic curse against Gog in Ezekiel 38–39. See G. K. Beale and Sean McDonough, “Revelation,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1144.

18 Robert S. Smith, “Songs of the Seer: The Purpose of Revelation’s Hymns,” *Themelios* 43 (2018): 195–96.

vealed and covenant promises are made (21:2–3). Finally, John describes the bejeweled Bride (21:18–21).

The Old Testament frequently depicts Israel as the bride or wife of the LORD. Ezekiel recounts how Yahweh “clothed” his bride Jerusalem in fine linen and embroidered apparel, yet she “played the whore” (Ezek. 16:10, 16). However, the prophets announced a coming day when the LORD would call back his wayward partner and “betroth” Israel to himself forever “in righteousness” (Hos. 2:14–20; Isa. 54:5–8). Isaiah 61:10–62:5 presents the end-time relationship between God and his restored people as a joyous wedding. The nuptial scene in Revelation 19 alludes to Isaiah’s prophecy that God’s people will rejoice when the LORD clothes his bride with “the garments of salvation . . . with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

In Revelation 19:9 the imagery shifts from the Bride’s preparation to the guests’ invitation to the marriage supper. In this passage and elsewhere, the book sometimes uses multiple images to describe a single referent. Here John pictures God’s people as the Lamb’s betrothed and as the blessed guests invited to the party. These images convey believers’ corporate and individual joy, anticipation, and intimacy with Christ, the Groom.

While Revelation 19 announces that the Bride is ready, she is not revealed and the marriage is not consummated until chapter 21, after the Lamb has conquered all his enemies. Then the angel says to John, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb” (v. 9). Then John sees “the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal” (vv. 10–11). The Bride in Revelation refers to both the redeemed people of God and the eternal city of God. The attractive picture of the Lamb’s stunning Bride contrasts sharply with the repulsive portrait of the imposter harlot Babylon. We should desire the former and detest the latter and thus persevere in faithfulness to Christ while we await the joyous consummation of his promises.

*Joy in a Secure Home*

We have considered how Revelation presents end-time joy in the context of an ultimate deliverance, a decisive victory, and a spectacular wedding. The book's final chapter presents a fourth picture: joy in a secure home. John writes,

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever. (Rev. 22:1–5)

These verses build upon the earlier description of the glorious new creation in Revelation 21:3–5. God will dwell forever with his people and bring ultimate healing, comfort, salvation, and restoration to all things. This vision also recalls Genesis's description of Eden before humanity's sin brought curse, disorder, pain, and death.<sup>19</sup> Adam and Eve were sent away from God's presence lest they eat from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–24). However, one day God's presence will endure forever, and the redeemed will have unending access to the tree of life (Rev. 21:3; 22:2, 14).

Revelation 22 presents not simply a restoration of Eden but its glorious end-time transformation. Gone is every trace of Adam's sin and banishment from Eden. Gone is every threat, trouble, or temptation. Instead, the redeemed behold God's face, are marked by God's name, and fulfill their calling as royal priests (22:3–5). This vision of new creation satisfies believers' longings for full redemp-

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19 In addition, Revelation's presentation of a new, greater Eden draws upon the restoration prophecies such as Ezekiel 47 and Zechariah 14.

tion (cf. Rom. 8:18–23), for a renewed vocation as priest-kings, and for an enduring home in God’s presence. Tom Schreiner rightly says, “What makes the new universe so dazzling is not gold or jewels but rather the presence of God.”<sup>20</sup> We will see, savor, and serve God and the Lamb forever. This is the ultimate consummation of end-time joy.

#### END-TIME JOY NOW AND FOREVER

These four pictures of end-time joy are not pie in the sky or wishful thinking. This is our secure future that shapes our lives and our loves in the present. We can and must sing a new song in this old land even though now for a little while the nations still rage and we still endure hardship and heartache. We rejoice now because Jesus loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood (Rev. 1:5). We rejoice now because our Savior lives and holds the keys of Death and Hades (Rev. 1:18). We rejoice now because he is coming soon to consummate his kingdom, right every wrong, and be with us forever (Rev. 21:1–5; 22:20). We rejoice now because we have a better hope than anything Babylon can offer: an ultimate deliverance, a decisive victory, a spectacular wedding, and a secure home. We rejoice now by faith to celebrate and anticipate what we will one day know by sight.

Jonathan Edwards writes, “So far therefore as we sing this song on earth, so much shall we have the prelibations of heaven. In this way we shall have something of heaven in our closets and in our families. And this will make our public assemblies some image of heaven.”<sup>21</sup> So now, with wet eyes and aching hearts, we join the heavenly chorus and declare, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12).

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20 Thomas R. Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 629.

21 Jonathan Edwards, “They Sang a New Song (Rev 14:3a),” in *Sermons and Discourses, 1739–1742*, ed. Harry S. Stout, WJE Online 22 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 241.