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seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy.

—Daniel 9:24



I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.

—Matthew 24:34

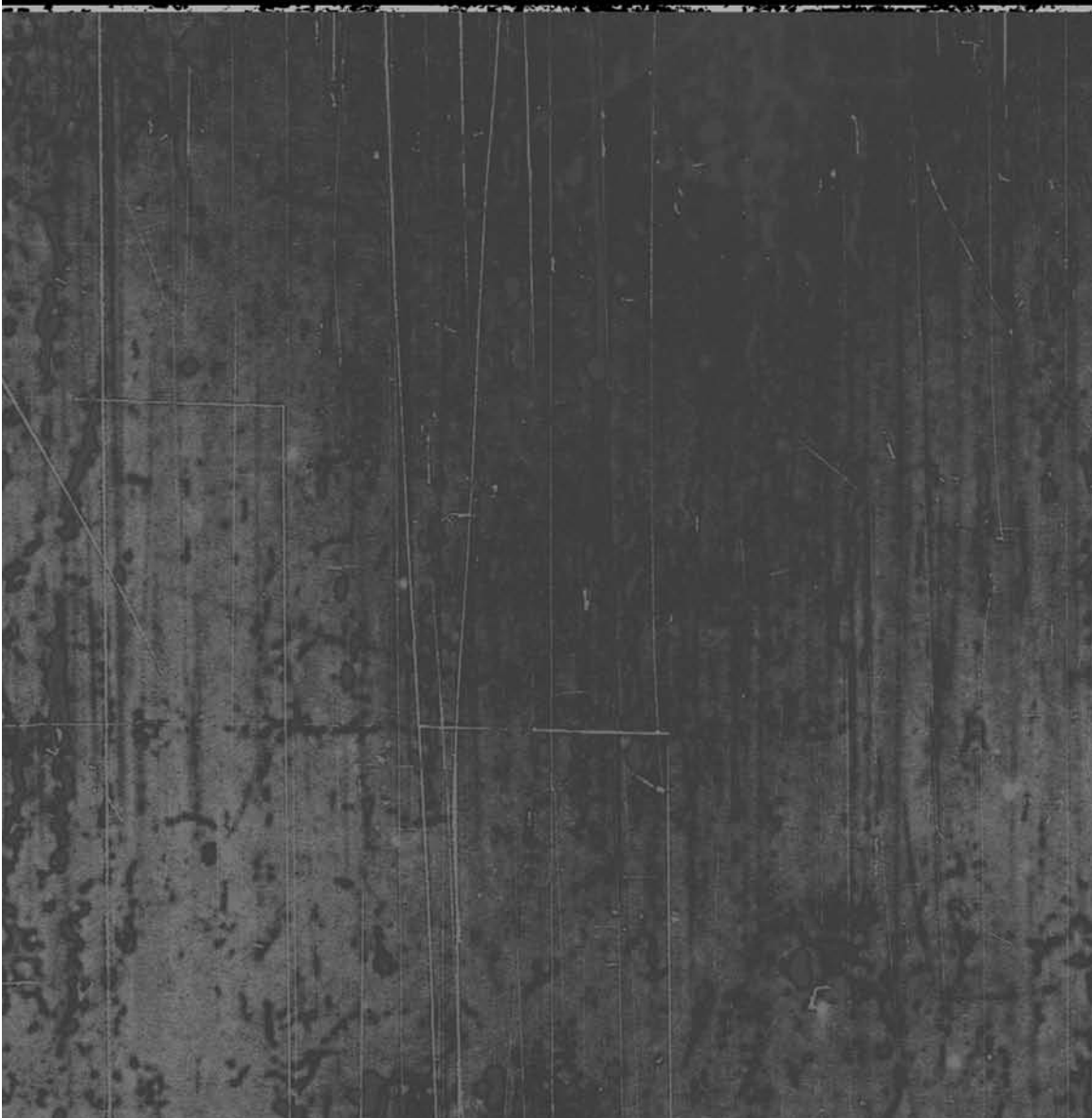
The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw — that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

—Revelation 1:1-3

ROME

CAPITAL OF THE EMPIRE

10 MONTHS AFTER THE BEGINNING OF THE TRIBULATION
(A.D. 65)



INTEMPESTA

Four great beasts, each different from the others,
came up out of the sea. The first was like a lion,
and it had the wings of an eagle. . . And there before me
was a second beast, which looked like a bear. . . After
that, I looked, and there before me was another beast,
one that looked like a leopard. . . After that, in my vision
at night I looked, and there before me was a fourth
beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful.
It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its
victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left.

—Daniel 7:3-7

In the royal gardens beneath a full moon, Vitas pursued the man he had once vowed to serve with loyalty or death. His emperor.

It was a night unnaturally still and hot, heavy with the unseen menace of a building storm, with the moon above Rome and the seven hills that guarded the city, a moon that bounced mercury light off the placid lake of the royal gardens into thinly spaced trees along its shore.

Nero was a fifty paces ahead of Vitas, lurching beneath an elaborate costume that impeded his progress. The costume had been pieced together from animals imported to the arenas to kill convicted criminals. Head to foot, Nero was draped in a leopard's skin. Two pairs of eagle wings were sewn onto the back of the costume. A lion's head from a massive male had been attached to the top, and Nero's head fit completely inside the skull, allowing him to see through the empty sockets. His arms and legs were covered by the skin from a bear's legs, which had also been sewn to the leopard skin that covered the bulk of

Nero's body. In the quiet of the night, the bear claws rattled with each step of Nero's steps.

Another man walked beside Nero. Helius. Nero's secretary and confidante. Helius—along with a man named Tigellinus—had been a companion since Nero was a teenage emperor, when the three of them roamed the streets of Rome at night to bully and rob strangers as if they were common thugs.

Helius carried a dull iron chain in his right hand, and it dragged along the ground, rattling in odd unison with the bear claws of Nero's costume.

Because of the noise and their apparent focus on their destination, Vitas was not worried that his emperor would notice his pursuit. He was far more worried about Nero's intentions. There had been times when Nero dressed in wolf skins and attacked slaves chained to stakes, but that had been part of very public celebrations.

This was too different. Too eerie. Vitas needed to know why.

Vitas was the single man in Nero's inner circle that the Senate trusted. There were times that Vitas felt he was a thin string holding Senate and emperor from snapping apart, and if that happened, war between both sides would be disastrous for the empire. If Vitas lost his awareness of Nero's actions, he would lose the Senate trust that gave him such value to both sides. The string would snap.

Ahead of Vitas, the roar of a real lion thundered from the inside of a gardener's hut, roiling through the heat and stillness back towards the Nero's palace.

Vitas wondered if the echoes of the roar clawed into the dreams and nightmares of the slaves in their various quarters. If those who woke to the roar pretended sleep, or silently held their children and whispered prayers to their gods.

The slaves knew there was danger in the roar. But, like Vitas, it wasn't the lion they feared.



Helius had been instructed by Nero to make no noise when they reached the hut. Just outside the closed door, Helius nodded when Nero stopped and pointed at the chain that Helius carried.

Helius was a man of arrogance and certainty except in the presence

of Nero; he hated himself for fumbling with the chain as he tentatively attached it to a collar around the neck of the animal costume. Bowed meekly when Nero slapped him once across the face for his clumsiness.

Nero pointed at the door of the hut.

Heliuss opened it, and by the chain, led Nero inside.

Two men and two women—were shackled to the stone of an interior wall, each sagging against the irons, each stripped to sackcloth rags.

They faced three cages. One held the lion. Another held a bear. And the third a leopard.

Heliuss stepped inside, leading the disguised Nero by the chain.

Heliuss jammed the torch into an iron band bolted to the wall for that purpose. He tied one end of the chain that held the beast to a bar of the lion cage.

Heliuss turned to the first man.

They were the same height, but obviously different ages. The first captive was nearing sixty; Heliuss in his twenties. Daylight would have shown the smooth and almost bronzed skin of Heliuss' features. His hair was luxuriously curly, his eyes a strange yellow, giving him a feral look that was rumored to hold great attraction for Nero. Heliuss wore a toga, and his fingers and wrists and neck were layered with jewelry of gold and rubies. There was something cat-like about his examination of the man captive in front of him.

Heliuss had a knife hidden in his toga. With deliberate slowness, he pulled it up and placed the edge of it against the man's face with sinister gentleness.

"The emperor wishes for you to bow down and worship the beast," Heliuss said. His fumbling fear was gone in service of Nero; temporary as it might be, with Nero in the costume, Heliuss was now the one in control.

"No," the man said quietly.

"No?"

Heliuss moved to the woman beside the man. He drew the knife downward from her ear to her chin. A narrow line of blood followed the path of the knife and streamed onto her neck.

"Leave the woman alone," the first captive said. "Turn your attention to me." The captive's hair matched his beard—greasy with days of unwashed sweat in captivity, gray hair far outnumbering the remainder

of black. His torso and arms were corded with muscle, suggesting a long life of physical labor.

“Then worship the beast,” Helius answered.

“I cannot.”

“Cannot?” Helius asked softly, waving the knife in front of the woman. “Or will not?”

“I will not betray my Master.”

“Nor will I,” said the woman. “I am not afraid.”

“Listen to me you Jews,” Helius said. “If you bow to the beast and worship him as divine, I have been given authority to spare you this.”

With his knife, Helius cut a piece of the rags that covered the first captive. He turned to the woman and used the piece of cloth to wipe blood from her face.

Helius tossed the bloody rag into the lion’s cage, and it savaged the cloth, pinning it with its mighty front paws and tearing at it with its teeth. Beside it in its cage, the bear roared its fury, and the agitated leopard paced back and forth.

Helius ignored the cages, letting his eyes caress the face of each captive, searching for fear. Because Helius knew fear so intimately in himself, he was an expert at finding it in others.

Helius smiled his hungry smile.

“Let me repeat. Nero wishes for you to worship the beast. Will you accept it as god? Or shall I let the beast loose to destroy you?”

The first man remained silent. Helius had expected the resistance. But it did not matter. Either way, Nero would be satisfied by a personal triumph over these Christians. They would worship him, hidden as he was beneath the costume of the beast, or he would take satisfaction in killing them as the beast. This symbolic victory would assure him that he truly was in control, that the widespread resistance to him from the Christians of Rome was meaningless.

Helius turned to the others, asking one by one if they were willing to bow down and worship the beast. None answered.

“Let me kill them!” The beast that was Nero spoke in a guttural, strangulated voice. “Let me tear their livers from their living bodies! Let me —”

“Silence!” Helius barked at the beast. These had been Nero’s instruc-

tions. Play the role of the master of the beast, so that none of the captives would guess Nero himself was hidden beneath its costume.

To the captives, Heliussaid. "Look at the beast closely. Do you not see it is a bear. A lion. A leopard with wings? Does it mean anything to you?"

The beast began hissing again, a frenzy that ended only when Heliussgrabbed the torch and waved the fire beneath its head. As if it truly were beast, not man. Nero, the amateur actor, was widely known for playing his roles seriously.

After Heliusscalmed the beast, he spoke to the captives. Anger tinged his words. "I understand far more about you Jews than you realize. I know of your prophet named Daniel. Hundreds of years ago, he foretold that Rome would be the fourth beast, greater than the kingdoms of Babylon and Persia and Greece. And here is your fourth beast, ready to destroy you."

"Death cannot destroy us," the first captive said. "Through my Lord and Master, it is a fate that we can greet with peace. If you would believe in His love and—"

Heliusslashed with his knife at that third captive, a slash of rage. This had not been part of Nero's instructions, but Heliusswas at heart at coward and could not resist the power he'd been given for this role. The blade flashed across the man's right bicep, instantly cutting through to muscle. Blood dripped down the man's elbow and onto the dirt floor.

"You refuse to worship the beast?" Heliussjeered. "Then tonight, he will be the beast to destroy you! And in the next years, he will continue destroy all the followers until the very last disciple is wiped from this earth. The name of Christos will be forgotten, but Nero will be revered forever!"

Heliusspun, taking hold of the chain that held the upright beast to the lion's cage.

"Ravage these men and women and destroy them," he spoke to the beast. "Leave their remains for the bear and the leopard and the lion!"

The beast howled.

"Yes," Heliuss told the beast. "Tonight you will sleep in peace knowing the power of the fourth beast is greater than the power of their God. You will triumph!"

Heliusswas forced to yell above the roars of the animals and the high-

pitched screaming of Nero, dressed in the fur of a leopard sewn to a lion's head and the claws of a bear.

Then Helius froze as a lone man walked into the hut.

Gallus Sergius Vitas.



Vitas had heard enough from outside to decide to stop it. And how he would do so.

He'd made his decision to enter the hut based on well known story about Nero. During those years, when as a teenaged emperor, Nero dressed himself as a slave and had roamed the streets at night to loot shops and terrorize strangers, he and his friends, including Helius and Tigellinus, had attacked rich senator and his wife. The senator was unaware the Nero was among the hoodlums and fought well, landing several punches directly in Nero's face. Nero and his friends fled.

While Nero had recognized the man as a senator, he made no plans to take action against him, realizing the senator had been perfectly justified in protecting himself from a mere slave. Unfortunately, when someone told the senator whose eyes he had blacked, he sent Nero a letter of abject apology. Because Nero could no longer pretend he'd been an anonymous slave, and it was now publically known the senator had committed a treasonous act against the emperor, that senator was forced to open his veins in a suicide that prevented the trial and conviction that would have ruined his family.

Yes. Nero was first and foremost, an actor. Vitas counted on that.

Without hesitation, Vitas marched forward and yanked the chain from Helius.

"If the emperor knows you are involved in illegal torture," Vitas said, "he will have you destroyed!"

For Vitas, it was an all or nothing bluff, pretending he did not know Nero was inside the costume. Trusting that Nero would be too ashamed to admit it. Now. Or later.

Vitas shoved Helius hard toward the doorway of the small hut.

"Outside!" Vitas commanded. "Now!"

Without hesitation, Vitas wrapped one end of the chain around the

bar of the lion cage, treating the man in the beast costume as lower than a slave.

“Don’t move,” he jerked the chain that held the beast. “I’ll be back to deal with you.”

Vitas forced himself to pretend outrage. But this was the moment. If Nero decided he would no longer play the role, Vitas was dead.

The beast snarled at him, a weird echo from inside the lion’s skull. But the beast did nothing else. Vitas knew he was safe. Temporarily.

Vitas spun on his heels and marched outside to Helius.



“You feed his delusions,” Vitas said to Helius.

The two of them stood outside the hut, in the shadows of an olive tree.

Helius shrugged, a smirk clear on his face in the moonlight.

Vitas had learned in battle in Brittania how to detach himself from the emotions of the moment. Yet it took immense willpower to restrain himself from withdrawing his short sword from his toga and charging at Helius. But it would not serve the empire for Helius to die, for Nero clung to the man with a neediness that barely kept Nero stable.

“Of course I feed his delusions.” Helius continued smirking, unaware of how closely the ghost of his own murder had passed by. “That is the whole point. His power. And how I survive.”

“How does this serve Nero?” Vitas demanded, pointing at the hut behind them.

Vitas was not particularly large, but tall and carried himself the way a man with solid compact muscles does. He was also cloaked with his family’s well-documented patrician background of generations of Roman purity, cloaked by the stories, almost legendary, about his bravery in battles against the Iceni in Brittania. In daylight, his flat, almost black eyes made his thoughts unreadable to his opponents, and without a smile, his face was implacable, like unweathered stone. Here, his face hidden in the shadow cast by the moonlight, he was that much more intimidating. Much as Nero needed Helius, Nero revered Vitas. Only Vitas could speak to Helius in this way and not fear later punishment in the stealthy form of poison or an assassin.

“His nightmares,” Helius said, finally sensing the deadly anger simmering beneath the calm of Vitas. “Nero wants to be rid of them.”

“By this travesty of justice?”

Helius shrugged. “No worse than anything else Nero has desired in recent years.”

Vitas could not argue that. “He is Caesar, the representative of our great empire. To protect the empire, the dignity of his position must be protected.”

“Protect the empire?” Helius sneered. “You truly believe in the empire?”

That was the question, Vitas thought. Could he continue to believe in the empire? It had once been his whole life. Until that final battle in Britannia. There, he had fought to defend the empire against barbarians. Now, as Nero became more of a megalomaniac every day, Vitas wondered who were the true barbarians, and if he needed instead to fight the empire.

“I believe,” Vitas answered without betraying his thoughts, “that you enjoy Nero’s worst instincts.”

Helius smiled. “Nero gets what Nero wants. I do for him as he directs me.”

“To secretly torture and kill these Christians.”

“His nightmares have worsened.”

Vitas needed no explanation. Nero, who had once shared a bed with his mother, had later ordered her murdered. As with his first wife, whose head he demanded as proof of death. His second wife, he’d kicked to death while she was pregnant. He’d poisoned his half brother. The list went on, until the most recent atrocity, the executions of hundreds of Christians. It was no wonder that demons haunted the man in the dark of each night.

Yet, monstrous as the man was, Vitas well knew that to end Nero’s life would likely result in civil war, as Nero had no successor. Civil war would destroy the empire. So Vitas served Nero and did his best as a trusted advisor to lessen the monstrosities.

“He expects this to quiet those nightmares?” Vitas said, gesturing at the hut.

“It’s that Greek graffiti,” Helius said. “That one senseless word that the Christians have begun to inscribe all across the city in defiance of him.”

Vitas was aware of it. Three Greek letters. With the snake in the middle.

Helius continued. "Their resolution to worship their Cristos despite his persecution has begun to shake Nero's own belief in his divinity."

"A man posing as beast is hardly divine."

"He believes that if he defeats them as their own prophet Daniel foretold, he will break this curse upon himself. He has taken some potions to delude himself further."

The constriction around Vitas' chest eased, only a little. If Nero's mind had been influenced by potions tonight, Nero would be all the more determined to remain in the role of the beast instead of giving emperor's orders to execute Vitas.

"I know about the Jewish rabbi you consulted," Vitas said. "So I also know of these scriptures."

"How?" Helius demanded. "Who told you that I sent for—"

"Secrets are difficult to keep in the palace," Vitas said, wearily. "How I know is of far less concern than what I know. Their prophet Daniel also prophecied that the fourth beast would be also destroyed. You've kept that from Nero?"

"I'm not suicidal," Helius said. "Of course I did. It's what he believes that matters, not the nonsense of a Jewish prophet from six hundred years ago. Nero will never be destroyed, and certainly never by a God of the Jews. Nero is convinced if they worship the beast or if the beast kills them, he is the victor. It's superstition of course, but you know full well how superstitious fear rules him."

Vitas did know full well Nero's dread of the gods and of omens. He also knew that Nero, with his absolute power, had performed far stranger acts than this with far less motivation. In a twisted way, this horrible parody made sense. But could Vitas allow himself to stand by, yet one more time?

"You think this will remain a secret?" Vitas argued. "That Nero is so afraid of the Christians he must dress up as beast and kill them himself?" Every day, Vitas was fully aware of how the Senate would view Nero's actions. "Think of how the tongues of the mobs will wag further when they hear this."

"What Nero wants, Nero gets."

“If he continues like this, there will come a point when he will no longer be tolerated. The empire will revolt against him. And you will lose your own power.”

“We are here and it is too late to stop this,” Helius snapped. “Do you expect some sort of divine intervention to save those inside? To save yourself from the act of defiance you have just committed against Caesar?”

Images of the final battle in Britannia flashed through the mind of Vitas. Of the power of the empire unleashed on the innocent.

Vitas spoke quietly. “The persecution must stop.”

“That’s the real reason you’re here tonight isn’t it.” Teeth gleamed in the moonlight as Helius smiled. “Your constant and tedious arguments to save the Christians. Perhaps you are one yourself?”

“Hardly. You and I both know they are innocent of treason. The empire cannot survive if it does not serve justice equally to all.”

Helius shrugged. “Give me power over principles any day. It’s a pity you won’t learn that lesson.”

“Take Nero back to the palace. With any luck, he won’t remember this.”

“It’s too late,” Helius said. “What’s begun must be finished.”

“No.”

“No?” Helius echoed. “I doubt you’ll stop me. You’ve become too soft, Vitas. Nero might not know it. But I do. The great warrior Vitas is a toothless lion. But what should one expect of one who had married a barbarian?”

His neck muscles tightened, but Vitas held himself back.

“Tell me,” Helius said, stilling taunting Vitas. “Is it true? Was it your sword that —“

“Enough!”

“Enough or you’ll kill me?” Helius taunted.

Vitas was frozen.

“See?” Helius said. “The great warrior Vitas would never have meekly accepted such insult.”

Helius turned his back on Vitas and hurried back to the hut.



“No!”

Helius had just taken the chain off the bars to the lion’s cage. The

beast with the wings and bears claws and head of a lion was pulling at the chain, reaching with claws to tear at the first of the four captives in shackles.

Vitas had made his decision. Over the last six months, he had allowed too much to happen already; his conscience could be pushed no farther. He'd stepped back into the hut. Ready to defy Nero, even if it cost him his life.

"No!" Vitas repeated. He spoke to the beast. "This is enough."

Nero, addled by lust and anger and the results of whatever potions the emperor had consumed, continued to hiss and snarl beneath the costume of the beast.

"Kill him!" Nero hissed from inside the lion's head. "Tear his heart out! Vitas must die. I tire of his defence of the Christians!"

In that moment, Vitas knew he'd lost his gamble. Nero had stopped acting, spoken his name. No longer could Vitas pretend that he was unaware of who wore the costume. No longer was Vitas protected by his value as the only man of Nero's inner court respected by the Senate.

"Kill him!" Nero's voice became higher and unnatural. It goaded the real beasts in the cages into a frenzy of noise.

"This must stop!" Vitas answered, resolute. If this was his final stand, he would not flee.

"Kill him!"

The noise of the beasts changed. Subtly at first. Then the low rumble became a distinct noise of itself, that slowly began to build and build.

The ground beneath them began to shake.

Heliuss swayed. Nero in his beast costume staggered. Vitas shifted his feet wider to keep his balance.

The cages began to shake back and forth.

As Vitas began to realize that the earth itself was quaking, lightning struck the thatched roof of the hut and the unnatural stillness of the night was destroyed by a tremendous peal of thunder.

The roof burst into flames and again lightning struck, deafening them again with instant thunder.

Heliuss fell to his knees; the ground continued to shake.

Vitas saw that the cage doors had been sprung open. That the animals were lurching out, dazed by their sudden freedom.

The huge lion advanced on Nero. Nero scrambled backward, into the body of the first captive, then fell at that captive's feet, moaning from inside his costume.

Vitas pulled his short sword from his toga, and stepped between Nero and the lion. Nero was emperor. Even though the emperor had ordered him executed, Vitas had his duty.

The lion crouched. It weighed three times what a man did, with teeth longer and sharper than daggers, paws as large as a man's head, and the power to take down an ox.

Vitas waited and watched, ready to fight, hopeless as it was.

Another boom of deafening thunder. The lion sank back, bewildered.

Lighting flashed again.

And the lion fled. The leopard and the bear followed.

Helius remained on his knees, cowering, tears streaming down his face.

In the calm that followed the next burst of lightning, the earthquake renewed itself.

Nero screamed. "The gods speak against me!"

He threw off his costume and dashed past Vitas, and fled the hut, leaving behind the eagle wings that had been sewn to the leopard fur. Helius too, fled, following Nero into the trees as lightning continued to cascade upon the grounds of the palace.

Vitas kicked aside remnants of burning straw from the roof of the hut.

All four of the captives shackled to the wall stared at him in silence.

Vitas advanced on the first one with his sword.

"Please spare the women," the gray-haired captive said, the older one who had faced Helius with so little fear. "They have children."

"What is your name?" Vitas asked him, pressing the flat of his sword up near the man's chest.

"John."

"John," Vitas said. "You do not deserve to die for what you believe."

Vitas leveraged his sword into John's shackles until they separated. One by one, he released each of the other captives.

They made no move to flee.

Vitas turned to the first woman. Her bleeding has lessened. Vitas tore a strip from his toga, and pressed it against her face. He lifted her hand until she held the cloth, then stepped away.

“Go to your children,” Vitas told her. “All of you. Go. Now is the time to make your escape. Before Nero convinces himself he is a god again.”

AFTERWORD

The Last Disciple presents an alternative to the *Left Behind* understanding of end-times events based on a *methodology* called *Exegetical Eschatology* (E^2). I coined the phrase *Exegetical Eschatology* to underscore the fact that above all else I am deeply committed to a proper *method* of biblical interpretation rather than to any particular *model* of eschatology. Put another way, the plain and proper reading of a biblical passage must always take precedence over a particular eschatological presupposition or paradigm. (More on this in an upcoming book titled *Exegetical Eschatology* [Tyndale House].)

For example, the pretribulational rapture model featured in the *Left Behind* series interprets Revelation 13 in a strictly literal fashion. Thus, Antichrist dies and resurrects himself physically in order to vindicate his claim to be god. The following passage from *The Indwelling*, volume 7 of the *Left Behind* series, communicates the point:

Carpathia catapulted himself to a standing position in the narrow end of his own coffin. He turned triumphantly to face the crowd, and David noticed makeup, putty, surgical staples, and stitches in the box where Nicolae's head had lain.

Standing there before now deathly silence, Nicolae looked as if he had just stepped out of his closet where a valet had helped him into a crisp suit. Shoes gleaming, laces taut, socks smooth, suit unwrinkled, tie hanging just so, he stood broad-shouldered,

fresh-faced, shaven, hair in place, no pallor. Fortunato and the seven were on their knees, hiding their faces, sobbing aloud.

Nicolae raised his hands to shoulder height and said loudly enough for everyone to hear, without aid of a microphone, “Peace. Be still.” With that the clouds ascended and vanished, and the sun reappeared in all its brilliance and heat. People squinted and covered their eyes.

“Peace be unto you,” he said. “My peace I give you. Please stand.” He paused while everyone rose, eyes still locked on him, bodies rigid with fear. “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in me.”

Murmuring began. David heard people marveling that he was not using a microphone, but neither was he raising his voice. And yet everyone could hear.

It was as if Carpathia read their minds. “You marvel that I speak directly to your hearts without amplification, yet you saw me raise myself from the dead. Who but the most high god has power over death? Who but god controls the earth and sky?” (*The Indwelling*, 366-67, emphasis added).

In sharp contrast, *The Last Disciple* series exegetes Revelation 13 in light of the whole of Scripture. Thus, Satan can *parody* the work of Christ through “all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders” (2 Thessalonians 2:9), but he cannot literally do what Christ did—namely, raise himself from the dead.

What is at stake here is nothing less than the deity and resurrection of Christ. In a Christian worldview, only God has the power to raise the dead. If Antichrist could “raise [himself] from the dead” and control “the earth and sky,” Christianity would lose the basis for believing that Christ’s resurrection vindicates his claim to deity. Further, if Satan possesses the creative power of God, this would subvert the post-resurrection appearances of Christ in that Satan could have masqueraded as the resurrected Christ. Moreover, the notion that Satan can perform acts that are indistinguishable from genuine miracles suggests a dualistic worldview in which God and Satan are equal powers competing for dominance.

The point here is not to call into question the orthodoxy of the *Left Behind* authors. We are committed to the same goals: reading the Bible for all its worth and inspiring hope in the Second Coming of Christ. Collegial debate in the interest of truth, however, is essential to the health of the church, while we adhere to the Christian maxim: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” We must debate this issue, but we need not divide over it. The point is to demonstrate the dangers inherent in the interpretive method they and other dispensationalists employ. Such dangers are not solely theological. Placing the beast in the twenty-first instead of the first century poses historical difficulties as well. For example, the apostle John tells his first-century audience that with “wisdom” and “insight” they can “calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666” (Revelation 13:18). No amount of wisdom and insight would have given them the ability to figure out the number of a Nicolae Carpathia character in the twenty-first century.

Furthermore, while Daniel was instructed to seal up prophecy because the time of fulfillment was in the far future (Daniel 8:26; 12:4, 9; cf. 9:24), John was told not to seal up his prophecy because its fulfillment was fore future (Revelation 22:10). John’s repeated use of such words and phrases as “soon” and “the time is near” demonstrate conclusively that John could not have had the twenty-first century in mind.

Finally, the horror of the “great tribulation” included not only the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple but the persecution of the apostles and prophets who penned the Scriptures and formed the foundation of the Christian church of which Christ himself was the chief cornerstone. Thus, the great tribulation instigated by Nero is the antitype for every type and tribulation that follows before we experience the reality of our own resurrection at the second coming of Christ.

For these and a host of other reasons *The Last Disciple* series places the great tribulation precisely where it belongs in a first-century milieu in which “the last disciple” comforts believers in the throes of the mother of all persecutions.

HISTORICAL NOTE

While some theologians date the letter of Revelation to A.D. 95 under the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian, a growing number are beginning to rely on historians who argue it was written in the early to mid-sixties of the first century.

In historical terms, late-date proponents must appeal to a single—and markedly ambiguous—source, found in the writings of church father Irenaeus. In his opinion written more than a century after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem, Irenaeus only devotes a single sentence to the dating of Revelation. Yet because of the complex grammatical construction of the Greek text, this sentence can be translated as saying that either: *John* ‘was seen . . . toward the end of Domitian’s reign’, or that the ‘*apocalyptic vision*. . . was seen. . . toward the end of Domitian’s reign’ (emphasis ours).

Aside from the many and varied credibility issues that modern scholars raise about the opinions of Irenaeus, late-date proponents have obviously chosen the latter translation, and with determination, have also ignored the internal evidence given by the letter itself.

For example, in Revelation 11:1, John is told to measure the temple. As all historians agree it was destroyed in A.D. 70, there simply was no temple for John to measure in A.D. 95. But no references in Revelation, or in the prophecies of Jesus or in any of the writings of the entire New Testament allude to the reconstruction that must occur for futuristic interpretations to be accurate.

Perhaps the strongest internal argument is one of silence. Late-date proponents cannot explain why, if written in A.D. 95, John makes no reference to the fall of the temple in Jerusalem. Surely, in all Jewish history, this ranks as the most devastating holocaust the Jews have faced. The ancient Jewish historian Josephus tells us that millions of Jews perished during its siege and fall. With the destruction of the temple mount, for all practical purposes the organized Jewish religion lost its house of God and the place He had sanctioned as an altar for sacrifices to Him. In fact, the practice of the Jewish religion was altered forever. Why would John be silent about this astounding horror if writing an apocalyptic letter *after* the event?

On the other hand, if Revelation was written before the fall of the temple, it is easy to understand that the vision of John was a divine prophecy, written to comfort and inspire the seven churches and all the other believers during the upcoming tribulations of Nero's persecution and the siege and fall of the Temple. In that historical light, it is much easier to interpret Revelation, and thus see how the predictions revealed are amazing in their accuracy.

While this novel is not presented as a historical rendering, many of its events are based on historical fact. The following footnotes may be helpful in understanding the background to the writing of the letter of Revelation.