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Revelation #17

**The Second Coming of Christ:
Blessed Hope or Dreaded Nightmare?
Revelation 6:12-17; 8:1-5**

There are several good reasons why the Apostle Paul described the Second Coming of Jesus Christ as our “blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). It is a “blessed hope” because it will mean the end of all sin and suffering in our lives. No more battles with temptation. No more feelings of guilt when we fail. No more diagnoses of cancer or heart disease or arthritis. No more sadness upon hearing of the death of a loved one. No more funerals. No more anger or resentment or unforgiveness or lust or greed. No more jealous rivalries. No more division between Christians. No more friction between husbands and wives or parents and their children.

But even better than all these glorious truths is what Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 1:10. There he tells us that “when” Jesus “comes on that day” it is to “be glorified in his saints and to be marveled at among all who have believed.” In yet another passage Paul says that when Jesus returns he will “transform our body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Phil. 3:21).

And perhaps the most “blessed” thing of all in the coming of Jesus is what John said in 1 John 3:2.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because *we shall see him as he is*” (1 John 3:2).

John recorded for us this same truth in the final chapter of the final book of the Bible, Revelation. In Revelation 22:4 he says: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.”

It is a “blessed hope” indeed. *But it is far from blessed for many.* And it is not something for which unbelievers should “hope”. For them, for those who persist in their unrepentant idolatry and rejection and hatred of God, it is a “dreaded nightmare.”

I know that you probably don’t want to hear about this. And to be honest, I’m not sure I do either. But we cannot claim to be people of the book, people of the Bible, people who believe that this is God’s inspired and inerrant revealed Word, and ignore, far less, deny what it says about the fate of those who reject Jesus as Lord and Savior.

The sixth seal judgment, as described in Revelation 6:12-17, is the first detailed description of what will happen at the end of this present age when Jesus returns. We know what will happen for God's people. But here we read of what happens to those who persist in unbelief.

The Sixth Seal

Last week we heard the voice of the martyrs, their passionate prayer to God that the evil perpetrated against Christians be avenged and judged. ***Here in vv. 12-17 we find the answer to their request.*** The judgment of the sixth seal must be associated with the final or consummate wrath that comes at the end of the human history.

There is in vv. 12-17 a description of ***massive, global, indeed cosmic upheaval and disruptions.*** There is a "great earthquake" in v. 12a. The sun becomes black as sackcloth and the moon becomes red like blood in v. 12b. In v. 13 the stars are described as falling to the earth. In v. 14 the sky vanishes, and "every mountain and island" are removed from their places.

What is this all about? Is John describing something that is physically literal, or could he be using natural calamities and cosmic disturbances to symbolically portray the turmoil of earthly nations and the judgment that is to befall this world at the time of Christ's return?

The way to answer that question isn't to read the Drudge Report or the Wall Street Journal. You won't get much help by turning to your favorite cable news network or whatever website or blog you typically read when you want to know what is happening in the world around us. The only way to answer that question is to realize, first of all, that John lived in the first century, not the twenty-first. John was a Jewish Christian, not a Gentile. John was immersed in the OT, not in Fox News or CNN or the Huffington Post.

John's language, his terminology, his worldview was shaped by the biblical perspective of what we know as the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus. I therefore concur with Andrew Perriman that we should try "to read forwards from the first century rather than backwards from the twenty-first century. One of the reasons why the apocalyptic language of the New Testament can be so puzzling to the modern interpreter is that we cannot help but read it retrospectively and with the advantage, which more often than not turns out to be the disadvantage, of hindsight" (*The Coming of the Son of Man*, 30).

This is a tremendous challenge for most Christians. We aren't accustomed to thinking in biblical terms. We aren't sufficiently familiar with the way language worked in biblical times and how biblical authors expressed themselves. We expect them to think like us, to talk like us, and to explain the future in the same way we would. What we simply have to do is to learn how to think, talk, and make use of language the way they did.

In the OT, the sort of language we find in Revelation 6:12-17 was used to portray not what is going on in the heavens but what is happening on the earth. Natural disasters, political upheaval,

and turmoil among the nations are often described figuratively through the terminology of cosmic disturbances. The ongoing and unsettled, turbulent state of affairs among earthly world powers is portrayed symbolically by reference to incredible events in the heavens. In other words, astronomical phenomena are used to describe the upheaval of earthly dynasties as well as great moral and spiritual changes. Once we learn to read this language in the light of the OT we discover that great upheavals upon earth are often represented with the imagery of commotions and changes in the heavens. As we shall see, when the sun and moon are darkened or the stars fall from heaven, the reference is to the disasters and distresses befalling nations on the earth.

Let me give you some examples. In Isaiah 13:9-10 we read of the impending judgment of God on **Babylon**, which he describes in this way:

“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (v. 10).

Clearly, these statements about celestial bodies no longer providing light is figurative for the convulsive transformation of political affairs in the Ancient Near East, on earth. The destruction of earthly kingdoms is portrayed in terms of a heavenly shaking.

We find much the same thing in Ezekiel as he describes the impending destruction of **Egypt**:

“When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD. . . . When I make the land of Egypt desolate, and when the land is desolate of all that fills it, when I strike down all who dwell in it, then they will know that I am the LORD” (Ezek. 32:7-9,15).

The destruction of **Idumea** (Edom) is described in this way:

“All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction” (Isa. 34:4-5).

Thus, as William Kimball points out, “when Israel was judged, or when Babylon was subdued by the Medes, or when Idumea and Egypt were destroyed, it was not the literal sun, moon, and stars that were darkened. The literal stars of heaven did not fall from the skies, and the literal constellations were not dissolved or rolled up as a scroll. These figurative expressions were clearly presented in a purely symbolic manner to characterize the destruction befalling nations and earthly powers” (*The Great Tribulation*, 166).

Language that describes the collapse of cosmic bodies, therefore, was often used by “OT prophets to symbolize God’s acts of judgment within history, with the emphasis on catastrophic political reversals” (R. T. France, *Matthew*, 922).

In summary, it reflects a failure to read the Bible on its own terms to insist that these words refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. As one author has said, “This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance” (N. T. Wright, *Victory*, 361). In other words, ***Revelation 6:12-14 is stock-in-trade OT prophetic language for national disaster***. John, therefore, is not prophesying that bizarre astronomical or geological events will occur. Instead, he is predicting that the judgment of God will soon fall decisively on the entire earth and those who refuse to repent and believe the gospel.

OK, but what about v. 14 where John says that “every mountain and island was removed from its place”? This language is repeated in conjunction with the seventh bowl judgment in Revelation 16:20. There we read that “every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found.” Is this physically literal, or is it another example of ***prophetic hyperbole***? Probably the latter. “Mountains” are often symbolic of evil forces and/or earthly kingdoms (cf. Jer. 51:25-26; Zech. 4:7) and “islands” (or “coastlands”) often represent pagan Gentile nations or kings (Pss. 72:10; 97:1; Isa. 41:1; 49:1; 51:5; 60:9; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 26:18).

I should also point out, however, that “mountains” and “islands” here may be symbolic simply of the most stable features of the world, all of which are portrayed in the OT as being displaced, cast aside, shaken, moved, etc. as a result of the presence of the Lord and especially the manifestation of his judgments. See Judges 5:5; Pss. 18:7; 46:2-3; Isa. 5:25; 54:10; 64:1; Jer. 4:24; Ezek. 26:18; 38:20; Micah 1:4; Nahum 1:5. Few, if any, commentators would suggest that these OT texts describe literal or physical displacement or movement of mountains and islands. Why, then, would they insist on it here in Revelation?

If you insist on interpreting these descriptions in physically literal terms, you have a problem. If, as Revelation 16:20 says, “every island fled away” and “no mountains were to be found,” and if, as Revelation 6:14 says, “every mountain and island was removed from its place,” how could the kings and all other unbelievers hide in “caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the rocks and mountains and rocks” to fall on them and protect them from the wrath of God? How could they hide in the mountains and call on them for protection if every mountain has already been literally removed and no longer exists?

So here is my point. Or rather, here is John’s point. When Jesus returns he will judge and destroy every political organization that opposes him. He will bring devastation on every government, every army, every nation, every philosophical movement, and every financial institution that refuses to submit to his Lordship. That is what John is describing here. The point is that all these celestial (heavenly) and terrestrial (earthly) phenomena are ***prophetic hyperbole for national and global catastrophe***. God’s judgment of earthly unbelief and idolatry is described in terms of heavenly disasters.

Let's turn our attention now to those on whom this judgment falls.

The language of Revelation 6:15-16 in which the people of the earth seek refuge from God's wrath in caves and mountains is taken from Isa. 2:10,18-21 and Hosea 10:8, all of which may yet be a further allusion to Genesis 3:9 where Adam and Eve are described as "hiding from the presence of the Lord."

I find it interesting that John describes the destruction of seven facets of physical creation: (1) the earth, (2) the sun, (3) the moon, (4) the stars, (5) the heavens or the sky, (6) mountains, and (7) islands. In similar fashion, there are seven groups of humanity who come under judgment: (1) kings, (2) great ones, (3) generals, (4) the rich, (5) the powerful, (6) slaves, and (7) those who are free. It seems fairly clear that the use of the number seven in each instance points us to ***the universality or the completeness or the comprehensiveness of the disasters and judgments that are to befall the earth.***

Be it noted that judgment comes upon all, regardless of their status in society or their wealth or their influence. Kings and slaves alike are accountable to God. The manifestation of God's wrath is a leveler of humanity. The rich and the powerful can't appeal to their earthly achievements to escape judgment. Generals can't call upon their troops to fight the Lamb.

Thus, I conclude that the first five seals portray different aspects of the whole of church history, in particular what believers will suffer in a world overrun with unbelief and opposition to Christ, whereas the sixth seal (and eventually the seventh as well) describes the hour that will end it. What we have seen, therefore, in these seal judgments is "the succession of woes which will sweep to and fro across the world throughout the course of history, and which often cause men to wonder whether the forces of evil are not altogether out of control" (Wilcock, 76).

But perhaps the most important and instructive thing for us to see is the reaction of all these individuals to the undeniable presence and power of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Would it not be the easiest thing in the world, the most sensible thing in the world, for these people simply to stop and take account of what is happening and who it is who is bringing this judgment? Is it not the height of folly to think that you could hide from God in caves and under rocks? It is utter insanity and evidence of the spiritual blindness and foolishness of sinful man to think that he can escape the coming judgment of God.

They clearly recognize that this final judgment is being poured out by "him who is seated on the throne," a reference to God the Father, and "the Lamb" who is clearly the Lord Jesus Christ. They just as clearly acknowledge that this is the final day of judgment (v. 17) and that it is inescapable. No one can avoid it. No one can stand against it (v. 17).

So why don't they repent? All they need to do to avert eternal disaster is to bow in repentance before the Lamb and confess him as Lord of all. Their recalcitrant, hard-hearted determination to

stand defiantly against Jesus all the way to the end, is repeated yet again in even greater detail in Revelation 9:20-21. And here we see that it isn't the case that they weren't given time and opportunity to repent, as if to suggest that these final judgments came too fast and did not provide them with the chance to bow the knee and believe and acknowledge their need of a Savior:

“The rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands nor give up worshiping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk, nor did they repent of their murders or their sorceries or their sexual immorality or their thefts” (Rev. 9:20-21).

Observe that these individuals are witnesses to the first six trumpet judgments. That is what John is referring to with the words, “*these plagues.*” They see them. They suffer from them. There is no escaping or denying the reality of what is taking place. They survive them, but still refuse to repent!

There are still many in our world today who insist that human beings are by nature good. They are inherently upright and not sinful. But here we see a stinging indictment and refutation of that optimistic view of human nature. Could there be any more graphic and explicit description of what theologians call *total depravity*?

In the final analysis, they don't want to look at God. “Hide us from *the face* of him who is seated on the throne.” If it were not for God's sovereign, saving grace and mercy, you and I would be numbered among these people. The only reason you desire and hunger for the opportunity to look on the face of infinite beauty and majesty and goodness is because God saved you: by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

You and I look upon the Lamb and we see one who has been slain and whose blood “ransomed people for God.” We love the Lamb. The Lamb loves us. We will never have to suffer the wrath of the Lamb, because the Spirit has led us to put our confidence and faith in what the Lamb did for sinners on the cross. By the way, does the image of a lamb filled with wrath strike you as odd? It seems to be a contradiction in terms. A lamb is by nature calm, docile, gentle, and easy-going. So, too, is the Lamb of God, until such time as unrepentant and defiant sinners spit in his face and mock him and ridicule his claim to be God.

[Parenthetical Interlude – 7:1-17]

The Seventh Seal

Following the parenthetical interlude in chapter 7, which we'll look at next week, we come to Revelation 8:1-5 and John's description of the seventh seal judgment.

After the jarring and disruptive nature of the sixth seal it feels a bit anti-climactic for John to say that with the seventh seal there is “silence” in heaven. So what does this mean?

A few scholars have argued that there is no content to the seventh seal, as indicated by the reference to “silence” in 8:1. To them, the seventh seal appears empty. This has led some to posit that the seven trumpets themselves, and perhaps also the seven bowls, constitute the content or substance of the seventh seal. Before drawing this conclusion, however, we must discern the meaning of “silence”. Various options are available.

- Some see the “silence” as a temporary suspension of divine revelation (for what purpose is not stated).
- This silence may be indicative of mankind’s awestruck reverence in view of the revelation of God’s wrath and the imminence of the end.
- Others think the silence is that of the heavenly hosts, i.e., angels as they stand witness to God’s redemptive purpose unfolding.
- Some suggest that this is an allusion to the silence that preceded creation and which now precedes the new creation.
- Perhaps this silence indicates God’s rest from the judgments that began with the first six seals. Again, however, this is speculative and lacks explicit biblical precedent.
- Others see it as no more than a dramatic pause in the narrative, preparatory to the introduction of the seven trumpets.
- Closer to the correct view is the fact that silence in the OT is often a prelude to some divine manifestation (Job 4:16; Zeph. 1:17; Zech. 2:13).

Many, however, myself included, contend that the meaning of “silence” must be found in the OT where it often points to *divine judgment*. See, for example, Pss. 31:17; 115:17; Isa. 47:5; Lam. 2:10-11; Amos 8:2-3; Hab. 2:20 (cf. Isa. 23:2; 41:1-5).

To be even more specific, perhaps the silence is an indication that God has heard the prayers of the martyrs for vengeance (Rev. 6:10) and is now prepared to respond. In this way the seventh seal is linked to 8:3-5 where the silence is related to God’s heavenly temple and sacrificial altar, from which judgment comes forth.

The imagery of the smoke of incense (see Ps. 141:1-2) rising before God (8:4) points to a positive answer to the martyrs’ request. Indeed, 8:5 would constitute the actual historical execution of God’s verdict on behalf of his people. Bauckham even suggests that “the silence is that during which the angel burns the incense on the altar to accompany the prayers of the saints”

(*Climax*, 70). Thus “at the climax of history, heaven is silent [figuratively speaking, of course] so that the prayers of the saints can be heard, and the final judgment occurs in response to them (v. 5)” (71).

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that “the prayers of all the saints” refers exclusively to the request by the martyrs whose souls John saw beneath the altar (the fifth seal of Rev. 6:9-11). Although surely inclusive of their request, “all the saints” must be a reference to the totality of God’s people throughout the course of the present church age. Thus we see in Revelation 8:3-4 that ***our prayers are taken seriously by God, are heard by him, and undoubtedly are one of the primary means by which God brings his purposes in history (including his judgments on an unbelieving world) to fulfillment.***

While the incense rises up to God, the fire of the altar is directed toward earth, the latter a metaphor anticipating the trumpet judgments that immediately follow in John’s vision. There is no need for 8:5 to elaborate on the essence or extent of that judgment, insofar as several subsequent texts will do that in great detail (see 11:14-19; 14:14-20; 16:17-21; 18:9-24; 19:19-21; 20:11-15). Note also that “peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning and an earthquake” (8:5) are elsewhere found in texts that undeniably describe the final judgment of the unbelieving world (11:18; 16:18). It may even be that John envisions the trumpets and bowls themselves as part of the answer of God to the prayer of the martyrs.

There is no clear reason why the silence lasts only “for about half an hour” (8:1). The use of the word translated “as” or “about” indicates that John is giving us only an approximation of time. It could be slightly less than half an hour or slightly more. Often in Revelation the time reference “one hour” is used to refer to a sudden and swift crisis in the judgment of the unrepentant or ungodly (see 3:3,10; 11:13; 14:7,15; 18:10,17,19). There is no reason to believe that a literal 30 minutes is in view.

Conclusion

The fact that the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will witness a simultaneous outpouring of both divine wrath and saving mercy strikes many as inconceivable. But it isn’t mercy to which people voice their objections. It is the notion that God is angry with enemies of the gospel and will hold them eternally accountable for their rejection of Jesus Christ. The Revelation given to John, however, cannot be ignored. There is a “great day” (Rev. 6:17) when the “wrath of the Lamb” (Rev. 6:16) will be seen and felt, and I would be in utter dereliction of my duty as a teacher of God’s Word if I conveniently skipped over this vitally important truth just so that some among you might feel better.

I strongly suspect that opposition to the concept of divine wrath is likely due to a misunderstanding of what it is. Wrath is not the loss of self-control or the irrational and capricious outburst of anger. Divine wrath is not to be thought of as a celestial bad temper or God lashing out at those who “rub him the wrong way.”

Divine wrath, as it is described in our passage today, is *righteous antagonism toward all that is unholy. It is the revulsion of God's character to that which is a violation of God's will.*

And I say this without the slightest hint of contradiction, that there is a very real sense in which *divine wrath* is a function of *divine love*. God's wrath is his love for holiness and truth and justice. It is because God passionately loves purity and peace and perfection that he reacts angrily toward anything and anyone who defiles them. J. I. Packer explains:

"Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not. But it is precisely this adverse reaction to evil, which is a necessary part of moral perfection, that the Bible has in view when it speaks of God's wrath" (*Knowing God*, 136-37).

And we must never forget that if we don't believe that humans deserve to have God visit upon them the painful consequences of their sin, we empty God's forgiveness of all meaning. If there is no punishment that sin warrants, then God *should* overlook our transgressions. Forgiveness is real and precious and glorious only because our sin has betrayed us into a situation in which justice demands that God inflict upon us the most serious and eternal consequences. But he has instead visited that judgment on his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. That is the glory of saving grace, that the infinitely holy God who should take action *against* us, instead has taken action *for* us.