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Revelation #21

He Shall Reign Forever and Ever!
Revelation 9:13-21; 11:14-19

Today, December 10, 2018, is the second Sunday in the season we call Advent. It is the season of the year in which we turn our collective attention to the truths of Christmas, which is to say, the truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God, his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and the ultimate purpose for which the Father sent his Son into this world.

I suspect that some of you are wondering to yourselves, “Why is Sam preaching from the book of Revelation during Advent? That seems so inappropriate. After all, what does the message of Revelation have to do with Christmas?” The short answer to that question is: Everything! Let me explain.

When we began our series in Revelation I told you that the theme or overriding emphasis in the book is actually quite simple: **God wins!** Revelation is all about a conflict between good and evil, between the Christ and the Antichrist, between the Lamb of God and the Beast, between the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ and the kingdom of Satan and all his demons. And the good news is that God wins!

Now, what does this have to do with Christmas, you ask? Simply this. Whenever we talk about the Incarnation of the Son of God, we have in mind the act whereby the second person of the Trinity took to himself human flesh and became a man. As John put it in his gospel, chapter one, verse fourteen, “The Word became flesh!” But it isn’t enough merely for us to assert this glorious and deeply mysterious truth. We need to press in more deeply and ask a follow-up question: *Why* did the Word become flesh? What was the *purpose* in God the Father sending God the Son in the power of God the Spirit to this earth to live and die and rise again? In other words, I’m asking the question: What is the purpose of Christmas?

You can’t answer that question by saying, “Well, the purpose of Christmas is to give us a good excuse to take off some extra time from work.” Nor can you say, “The purpose of Christmas is to provide us with an opportunity to give gifts to people we love and to receive gifts from them.” That may be the purpose of Christmas in the minds of non-Christians who simply don’t know what the Bible teaches, but for you and me Christmas means something far deeper and more profound than that.

We could answer the question about the purpose of Christmas and why the Word was made flesh by pointing to any number of biblical texts. I could direct your attention to John 3:16 which tells us that the reason God the Father sent God the Son in the power of God the Spirit was to

demonstrate his love for a fallen world and make it possible for us to inherit eternal life. And that would be perfectly true. But there is more to it than that.

I could point you to what Jesus himself said about the purpose of his coming to earth. In Matthew 20:28 he said, “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” And that, too, would be altogether true and accurate.

I could go on and on citing numerous biblical texts that describe the reason why Jesus came to earth through the womb of a young virgin girl in first century Israel. But today I want us to consider one other reason that most people would just as soon ignore. And this is the reason that ties in most directly to the overall theme or emphasis of the book of Revelation.

For this we must turn our attention to something else that the Apostle John wrote. In his first epistle, chapter three, he said this:

“The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8)

Yes, Jesus came to live a sinless life, the life that you and I should have lived but are unable to do so perfectly. But in order to live this sinless life Jesus had to successfully resist the temptation of Satan and defeat the Enemy’s efforts to undermine that obedience. Yes, Jesus came “to take away sins” (1 John 3:5) and did so by dying in our place on the cross. But it was by means of the cross, as Paul says in Colossians 2:15, that Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities [i.e., Satan and his demons] and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him [or better still, in or through “it”, that is, through the cross]” (Col. 2:15).

And of course it was by rising again from the dead that Jesus overcame and defeated the power of death and guaranteed for us that we too will one day be raised to an entirely new life in a new and glorified body. The author of Hebrews tells us that by dying and rising again Jesus destroyed the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivered all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery (Heb. 2:14-15).

So I hope you can now see that whatever else Christmas may mean, it means that ***God the Father sent God the Son in the power of God the Spirit to defeat and overthrow and ultimately destroy Satan and all his works.*** And that, I suggest, is also the primary emphasis or theme of the book of Revelation. And nowhere do we see this with greater clarity in Revelation than here in Revelation 9 and 11.

So let’s turn our attention to John’s vision of the sixth and seventh trumpet judgments, for in them we find a graphic and highly symbolic description of the activity of Satan in the earth and the ultimate triumph of Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

The Sixth Trumpet (9:13-21)

Whose “voice” is it that John hears (v. 13)? Is it that of Jesus (as in 6:6), or an angel (as in 16:7), or it the voice of God the Father? We can’t be certain, but the fact that the voice emanates from the golden altar connects this sixth trumpet judgment with the saints’ prayer for vindication in Revelation 6:10-11.

People in the OT “sometimes expressed a desire to seek safety and protection from others by holding on to the horns of the altar (1 Kgs. 1:50-51; 2:28-34). Could the ‘four horns of the golden altar’ here refer to the full power of God that will be expressed in answering the cry of the saints by judging the wicked in the following trumpets?” (Beale, 506). Perhaps.

We see in v. 14 that “four angels” have been bound (*deo*; cf. 20:2) “at the great river Euphrates,” apparently restrained against their will. This would strongly suggest that these “four angels” are demons (cf. 9:1-3). It may be that what we read here is a rescinding of the command given back in 7:1-3 where “four angels standing at the four corners of the earth” were restrained from doing damage in the earth until the people of God had been sealed and made secure in their relationship with God.

In the time of John’s writing, the Euphrates was the eastern border of the Roman Empire, beyond which were terrifying and greatly feared horsemen of the Parthian Empire. But the Jewish people viewed the Euphrates as the northern frontier of Palestine, across which “Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian invaders had come to impose their pagan sovereignty on the people of God. All the scriptural warnings about a foe from the north, therefore, find their echo in John’s blood-curdling vision” (G. B. Caird, 122). On this see especially Isa. 5:26-29; 7:20; 8:7-8; 14:29-31; Jer. 1:14-15; 4:6-13; 6:1,22-23; 10:22; 13:20; Ezek. 38:6,15; 39:2; Joel 2:1-11,20-25; as well as Isa. 14:31; Jer. 25:9,26; 46-47; 46:4,22-23; 50:41-42; Ezek. 26:7-11.

These demonic invaders are coming *at God’s appointed time*: they had been “prepared for the hour, the day, the month, and the year.” This clearly reminds us that contrary to what you think, and contrary to all appearances, *God is in complete control not only of what Satan and demons are allowed to do but also the precise time when they have been ordained by God to do it*. Their aim is to kill a third of mankind. Is this numerically literal, such that precisely 33 1/3% of humanity are killed? Or is it John’s way of describing a preliminary, partial judgment that will only later, at the end of history, reach its consummation? I think it is the latter.

A Massive Demonic Army Unleashed

Although it isn’t explicitly stated, it appears from vv. 16-19 that these four “angels” have power over a massive demonic army of horsemen. The number of mounted troops is “twice ten thousand times ten thousand” or 200,000,000 (in all likelihood, symbolic of an incalculable number, an innumerable, indefinite group; see Gen. 24:60; Lev. 26:8; Num. 10:35-36; Deut. 32:30; 33:2,17; 1 Kings 18:7-8; 21:12; Dan. 7:10).

There is no basis whatsoever for trying to identify this “army” with the military forces of Red China that allegedly stand poised to invade Israel. It seems clear from what we saw in Revelation 9:1-11 and from the description of these horsemen that we are dealing with *a symbolic portrayal of demonic hosts*, not human soldiers.

Again, let us take each descriptive item in turn. In doing so, however, we must be careful not to let our concern for the particular elements of their makeup obscure the overall visceral impact that John intends. In other words, John’s point in piling up these monstrous metaphors is to underscore “that the demons are ferocious and dreadful beings that afflict people in a fierce, appalling, and devastating manner” (Beale, 510).

- The riders of the horses (and perhaps the horses themselves) “had breastplates the color of fire and of sapphire (or hyacinth) and of sulfur” (9:17).
- The heads of the horses “were like lions’ heads” (9:17). Again, this points to their fierceness.
- Out of the mouths of the horses came “fire and smoke and sulfur” (9:17). Elsewhere in Revelation “fire and brimstone” or “fire and sulfur” are descriptive of scenes of the final judgment of unbelievers (14:10; 21:8) and of the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet (19:20; 20:10). See also “fire, sulfur, smoke” in several OT texts relating to judgment (Gen. 19:24,28; Deut. 29:23; 2 Sam. 22:9; Isa. 34:9-10; Ezek. 38:22).
- In v. 19 the power of the horses is said to be in their tails, “for their tails are like serpents with heads.” John likens their tails to serpents, the heads of which are the source of the harm inflicted. That these are demonic armies is thus confirmed, for elsewhere in Revelation the “serpent” (*ophis*) is always a reference to Satan (12:9,14-15; 20:2). This reference to the serpent-like tail of the horses may specifically allude to their deception of unbelievers, for “the sweeping of the Serpent’s ‘tail’ [in Rev. 12] is symbolic of his [Satan’s] deception of the angels whom he caused to fall” (Beale, 514).

Again, the four angels who were bound at the river Euphrates, who are then released, employ this massive demonic army to kill 1/3 of mankind (cf. 9:15), utilizing the “fire and the smoke and the brimstone” that proceeded out of their mouths (9:18). The similarities with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah are obvious (Gen. 19:24,28). Note that these three elements are now called “three plagues” (v. 18).

Whereas the demons, portrayed as locusts, in Revelation 9:5 were **not** permitted to kill anyone, but only to torment, this demonic army from beyond the Euphrates **is** permitted to kill. Is this a literal, physical termination of human life, or is it figurative for spiritual or emotional or psychological “death”? The verb translated “kill” (*apokteino*) generally refers to literal physical death in Revelation. That would seem to be confirmed by v. 20 (“the rest . . . who were not

killed”). If that is the meaning here, John envisions this demonic host (under and subordinate to God’s sovereignty) killing a sizeable number of earth dwellers (i.e., unbelievers), whether through illness (perhaps outbreaks of infectious diseases), accident, natural disaster, famine, suicide, etc.

In v. 19 these demonic horses/horsemen are said to “wound” or to do “harm” (*adikeo*), the same Greek word used in 9:4,10 where demonic “locusts” torment, but do not kill, those who lack the seal of God (cf. also its use in 2:11; 7:3). Perhaps, then, the “wound/harm” here (v. 19) is not physical death but a variety of forms of spiritual and psychological torment and emotional anguish short of, but a prelude to, death itself.

Unrepentant!

Verse 20 does not explicitly say that the *purpose* of the demonic plagues was to induce or stir up repentance. Certainly such plagues serve as a warning, but one that goes unheeded. This highlights the hardness of heart of those who lack the seal of God on their foreheads. Michael Wilcock adds this insightful comment:

“The death-dealing horsemen of Trumpet 6 are not tanks and planes. Or not only tanks and planes. They are also cancers and road accidents and malnutrition and terrorist bombs and peaceful demises in nursing homes. Yet ‘the rest of mankind, who were not killed by these plagues’, still do not repent of their idolatry, the centering of their lives on anything rather than God, or of the evils which inevitably flow from it. They hear of pollution, of inflation, of dwindling resources, of blind politicians, and will not admit that the first four Trumpets of God are sounding. In the end they themselves are affected by these troubles, and for one reason or another life becomes a torment: the locusts are out, Trumpet 5 is sounding, but they will not repent. Not even when the angels of the Euphrates rise to the summons of Trumpet 6, and the cavalry rides out to slay – by any kind of destruction, not necessarily war – a friend or a relative, a husband or a wife: not even in bereavement will they repent” (99-100).

Here we have a typical OT list of idols according to their material composition: gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood (see Dan. 5:4,23; Pss. 115:4-7; 135:15-17; Deut. 4:28). John portrays the worship of idols, in whatever form that idolatry might take, as the “worship” of “demons”. We should probably translate v. 20 – “so as not to worship demons, *that is*, the idols . . .” On this he agrees with Paul (1 Cor. 10:20) as well as several OT texts (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 96:5; 106:36-37), that ***all idolatry, whatever form it may assume, is ultimately energized by and representative of demonic activity.***

In v. 21 they are described as not repenting of yet additional sins, a list obviously derived from the Ten Commandments. These particular four vices are often associated with idol worship in both the OT and NT (Jer. 7:5-11; Hos. 3:1-4:2; Isa. 47:9-10; 48:5; Mic. 5:12-6:8; Rom. 1:24-29; Gal. 5:20; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).

[Just as there was an interlude, a parenthetical pause, in 7:1-17 between the sixth and seventh seals, so also there is a similar parenthesis in 10:1-11:13 between the sixth and seventh trumpets.]

Second Explanatory Interlude (11:14)

The Seventh Trumpet (11:15-19)

I can only speak for Ann and me, but when we are expecting company at the house we get a bit frantic. We divide up responsibilities, whether it be vacuuming the carpets, cleaning up the kitchen, wiping down the bathroom, taking out the trash, dusting furniture, etc. I have to confess that we don't do this on a daily basis. It usually only takes place when we have reasonably high expectations that visitors are on their way. That isn't to say my wife doesn't keep a clean and tidy house! She does. But I trust you understand my point.

Preparing ourselves for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ ought to have a decidedly different effect on us. There is no doubt whatsoever that he's on his way. I don't know when that will be, but I'm absolutely certain it is certain to occur. Unlike friends here in OKC and elsewhere, who might call at the last minute to cancel their plans or reschedule them for a later date, Jesus **is** coming, and he won't be a millisecond behind schedule. Our problem, as you know, is that we have no idea when this will be. My point is simply that in the case of Christ's return to this earth, we need to be ready every minute of every day. I suspect that if you were told the Queen of England planned on visiting you sometime in the next two weeks, you would go home and immediately get things in order, even if it turned out that she didn't arrive until the last hour of the last day. Knowing that Jesus is assuredly coming again ought to exert on our souls the most powerful sense of urgency to get our lives in order, to stir up our hearts in expectation, and to turn our eyes toward heaven as we await his appearing.

I say all this because the certainty of Christ's coming again is clearly in view in Revelation 11:15-19 and the description of the seventh trumpet judgment. In his commentary on Revelation, Joel Beeke rightly points out that

“the passage in Revelation describing what will happen after the blowing of the last trumpet is *proleptic* or anticipatory. John is so certain of the fulfillment of what he prophesies that he speaks of it in the past tense, as though it were already an accomplished fact” (327).

Some contend that these verses do not describe the content of the seventh trumpet but simply anticipate it. The content of the seventh trumpet is then identified as the seven bowls. They argue that these verses portray no action but merely songs or hymns of God's reign. But action *is*, in fact, portrayed in these verses. A song or hymn can depict the content of a “woe” or trumpet judgment as easily as a vision can. Also, what could possibly be more severe or demonstrable

than the last, climactic, judgment itself, regardless of how long it lasts? Also, the most natural interpretation of 11:14, where the third woe or seventh trumpet is “soon to come” is that 11:15-19 form its content.

Question: How could John have heard these “loud voices” if they occurred “*in heaven*” (v. 15a)? See also 12:10 and 19:1. Elsewhere he speaks as if from an earthly perspective and uses the phrase “*from heaven*” (10:4,8; 11:12; 14:2,13; 18:4). It would seem that on a few occasions John was either in a visionary trance state or bodily/spiritually present in heaven when he received his revelations.

The “loud voices” are either those of the angelic hosts worshiping God, or perhaps the saints in heaven (7:9; 19:1,6), or perhaps the twenty-four elders who are then portrayed as falling down in worship and speaking their praises in vv. 17-18.

The declaration is that what Satan formerly ruled, in a manner of speaking, as the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Eph. 2:2; cf. 6:12) and “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), has now finally and wholly been taken by the Lord and His Christ! Note that in v. 15 we read of the “*kingdom* of the world” (singular) not “kingdoms” (plural). All the secular empires of this earth are actually one earthly kingdom ruled by Satan, but now under the sovereign sway of Jesus.

Whereas in 1 John 5:19 we are told that now, in some sense, in this present age, “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one,” a day is coming (this day, described in 11:15-19) when such shall no longer be! ***This is the consummate overthrow of all God’s enemies and the manifestation of the universal and cosmic extent of his rightful rule!*** Whereas the “world” could refer to the totality of creation it more likely “refers to the human world that had been in opposition to God and in conflict with his purposes” (Aune, 2:638). Interestingly, the only other verbal parallel to this phrase is found in Matthew 4:8 where Satan offers dominion of “the kingdoms of the world” to Jesus if he will only bow before him. The implication is that such dominion was, at that time, Satan’s to offer. ***But no longer!*** G. B. Caird explains:

“In one sense God’s sovereignty is eternal: he entered on his reign when he established the rule of order in the midst of the primaeval chaos (Ps. xciii. 1-4); he has reigned throughout human history, turning even men’s misdeeds into instruments of his mercy; and above all he reigned in the Cross of Christ (xii. 10). But always up to this point he has reigned over a rebellious world. A king may be king *de jure*, but he is not king *de facto* until the trumpet which announces his accession is answered by the acclamations of a loyal and obedient people” (141).

Four additional observations are called for. First, as I said earlier, the past tense “*has become*” in v. 15 is used *proleptically*, that is to say, a future event is so certain to occur that it is described as a reality of the past. Second, who is the “he” in v. 15 that “will reign forever and ever”? Is it God the Father, the “Lord” of v. 15, or God the Son, i.e., “his Christ”? Or is it both, as John envisions

them as an inseparable unity? Third, a phrase parallel to “he shall reign forever and ever” is found in Revelation 22:5 where it refers to *us* in the New Jerusalem! God will reign forever and ever, but so will we . . . with him! Finally, this verse is not saying that political parties and positions of earthly power and authority will be taken over by Christians so that the world will finally be Christianized. Verse 15 does not refer to what will happen before Christ returns but what will happen when and after he returns. It describes not this present age in which we live but the future age of eternity.

The Declaration of the 24 Elders

The twenty-four elders once again resume their familiar posture: face down in the presence of God! Their cry is one of **gratitude**. They address God as the “Lord God, the Almighty” (cf. 19:6). The word “Almighty” (*pantokrator*) means sovereign ruler or ruler over all. The Roman Caesars presumptuously adopted this title for themselves. But this day will expose them as charlatans and usurpers as God exerts his rightful Lordship over all.

But something is missing. Their declaration “**who is and who was**” (v. 17) lacks the third element found earlier, “**who is to come**” (1:4; 4:8). In all likelihood this means that the final part of the threefold name for God (“is, was, is to come”) is not merely a reference to his sovereignty over the future or of his timeless nature, but specifically speaks of the end time, when God, by means of the return of Christ, will break into world history and overthrow once and for all every opposition. **The God who “is to come” has come!** The promise of ultimate victory is so utterly immutable that John speaks of it as if it had already arrived.

The rage of the nations is provoked by the inception of God’s rule through his Christ. This is a clear reference to Psalm 2:2 – “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed” (see also vv. 5,10-12). The word translated “wrath” (*orge*), which is said to have come, is always used in Revelation of the final outpouring at the end of history (6:16-17; 14:10-11; 16:19; 19:15). Note well: “the nations were enraged (lit., *orgisthesan*) and God’s wrath (*orge*) came.” This is an example of how the punishment fits the crime: **their rage against God is met by God’s rage against them!**

The fact that this is the time “for the dead to be judged” and the faithful rewarded proves that John has in view the end of history. The parallel in Revelation 20:12-13, which all acknowledge speaks of the final judgment, makes this inescapable. Again in v. 18 we see that the punishment fits the crime (sin), for God “destroys” (*diaphtheirai*) those who have sought to “destroy” (*diaphtheirontas*) the earth (the “earth” here is probably a reference to God’s people).

Believers, on the other hand, now receive their heavenly “reward”, part of which, perhaps, is bearing witness to the judgment of those who have persecuted them (and thus this, too, is God’s positive answer to the prayer of 6:9-11). For the response of God’s people (described in almost identical terms) to judgment of the wicked, see 18:24-19:5. For other elements of this “reward”, see 2:7 (22:14); 2:11; 2:17; 2:26-27; 3:5 (7:14); 3:12; 3:21; 7:15-17; 22:3-4; 22:14.

A Concluding Vision of Heaven Opened

Was the ark of the covenant somehow translated into heaven before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 b.c.? There is no way to know. There is a tradition in Judaism that some expected the return of the ark of the covenant at the end of history when God would once again graciously dwell among his people. Indeed, one legend had it that Jeremiah removed the ark to safety in a cave or buried it on Mt. Sinai where it would remain hidden until the final restoration of Israel (see 2 Macc. ii. 4-8; cf. 2 Bar. vi. 5-10; lxxx.2). But no such expectation is found in the biblical literature.

People couldn't look on the ark in the OT. Those who transported it were given special instructions for how to cover the ark without looking on it. The reason was because the ark represented or embodied God's holiness and the object lesson was to awaken and alert people to their sin. But the fact that the ark is now open to be "seen" indicates that sin has been forgiven and the barrier to God's presence has been torn down. Thus, most likely "the ark is shown here as a symbol, representing God's covenant with his people" (Phillips, 336).

This, then, is the glorious purpose of Christmas. God the Father sent God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit to defeat and overthrow the works of the Devil, and by doing so to deliver his people from the guilt and condemnation of their sin.

And this marvelous and majestic description of the seventh trumpet judgment is a reminder to us all that God will win! Not all the nuclear power on earth can thwart the full and final revelation of his kingdom authority. Not all the backroom shenanigans of conspiratorial politicians and power-brokers can delay the ultimate judgment of all unbelievers. Not all the immoral chaos and vain philosophy of a world gone mad can prevent the ultimate rule and reign of King Jesus.