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Revelation #29

Armageddon! The War to End All Wars Revelation 16:1-21

Theories about the end of the world have become big business in recent years. Certain *environmentalists* tell us that unrestrained global warming will bring about the end of the world as we know it. Certain *politicians* tell us that the world will likely end in a nuclear conflagration, perhaps instigated by North Korea or Russia. Certain *astronomers* tell us that one day a massive meteorite will break through our atmosphere and crash headlong into the earth, setting in motion a series of climate changes and floods and earthquakes that will mark the world's end. Then, of course, we've got hundreds of *movies* coming out of Hollywood that are making a fortune by promoting the idea that in some far or other aliens from a distant galaxy will invade us and either colonize or cannibalize our world, bringing an end to life on this planet.

It all makes you stop and give more serious consideration to that bearded hippie walking the sidewalks of our streets with a sandwich board which declares: "Repent! The world is coming to an end!" But of course there are others who insist that the world will *never* come to an end. Life on earth will simply continue to evolve and expand and develop with ever increasing technological sophistication. Life 10,000 years from now will be noticeably different, but human beings will still be here doing their thing, whatever that "thing" might be.

So, what does the Bible say? Does Scripture give us a hint as to whether the world will end, and if so, how? Yes, it does. Of course, as you already know, it doesn't tell us what everyone really wants to know, namely, *when* will it end? That is a mystery that God has chosen to keep hidden within his own heart. But make no mistake about it: God, in Scripture, has very clearly told us *how* the world will end.

One more word of clarification about the so-called "end" of the world. In speaking this way neither the Scriptures nor I are suggesting that human existence on earth will ever end. What the Bible tells us is that *human history* in its present form or shape will come to an end. But *God's people will continue to live forever and ever on a new and redeemed earth, an earth that is free from pollution, free from corruption, free from natural disasters, free from the effects of sinful human beings, free from war and pestilence and disease, free from the presence of Satan and his demonic forces, an earth that will be glorified and transformed to serve as the habitation in eternity for those whom Jesus Christ has redeemed and saved by his cross and resurrection.* In fact, the final two chapters in Revelation go into considerable detail about the New Heavens and New Earth. If you're interested, go ahead and spend some time reading and meditating on Revelation 21-22.

So, if the Bible doesn't tell us *when* this happen, what does it say about *how* it will happen? Aside from the wide variety of alternative beliefs about what will happen at the end of the age, I think I can sum up what most if not all Bible-believing followers of Jesus will agree on. Let me sum it up this way. The Scriptures, and in particular the book of Revelation, tell us that there will be ever-increasing expressions of demonic activity, ever-increasing expressions of idolatry and immorality, and ever-increasing persecution of Christians by the world system that hates God and his truth. Eventually, at some point in the future, perhaps in our lifetime, perhaps not, Satan will orchestrate a global assault on the Church of Jesus Christ in one last-ditch attempt to crush the kingdom of Christ. But Jesus will return in the clouds of heaven and together with the angelic hosts and the multitudes of saved men and women will destroy his enemies and bring final and decisive judgment against those who have resisted, defied, and blasphemed his name.

As I said, Christians differ on a lot of other details about what will or will not happen in conjunction with the return of Christ, but most will agree on the basic truths that I just stated about how human history in its present expression will come to an end.

The good news for us today is that Revelation 16 speaks to this very point. This chapter brings us to the final seven expressions of divine wrath and judgment against an idolatrous and immoral world. We looked closely at the seven seal judgments and the seven trumpet judgments. Today we turn our attention to the seven bowl judgments. You will be happy to hear that apart from the final paragraph of Revelation 19, this is the last time the book of Revelation speaks in detail of the wrath of God. If that doesn't make you happy, I assure you it makes me happy!

Let me briefly remind you that all three series of seven judgments (seals, trumpets, bowls) portray events and phenomena that *occur repeatedly throughout the course of history* between the first and second comings of Christ. All three series of seven judgments bring us to the consummation at the close of human history where we see the final judgment of unbelievers, the salvation and vindication of God's people, and the full manifestation of the kingdom of Christ.

I'm repeating what I've already said on numerous occasions, but I think it's important enough to continue to bring this to your attention. According to my understanding of the text in Revelation, all (or at least the first six) of the seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are released by the Sovereign Christ at the beginning of the present inter-advent age, at the time when Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father on high. *These judgments and plagues are thus descriptive of the commonplaces of human history, i.e., they can and do occur at any and all times throughout the course of the present age and do not necessarily sustain a temporal relationship to each other.* It is only with the 7th in each series (and perhaps with the 6th trumpet and bowl) that we are assuredly at the close of history.

Thus, I believe that the seal, trumpet and bowl judgments are *temporally parallel*. The fact that the trumpet judgments are partial and the bowl judgments are complete simply indicates that *what can occur in a limited or partial manner at any point in history between the two advents of Christ, can also occur, at any point in history between the two advents of Christ, in a*

universal or more thorough-going manner. The effect or impact of these plagues of judgment on the unbelieving world is at one time and in one place restricted, while at another time in another place, widespread.

Thus, contrary to the futurist interpretation, Revelation is not concerned merely with events at the close of history, immediately preceding the second advent. Rather, there are multiple sections in the book, each of which recapitulates the other, that is to say, each of which begins with the first coming of Christ and concludes with the second coming of Christ and the end of history. Each of these sections provides a series of progressively parallel visions that increase in their scope and intensity as they draw nearer to the consummation. This is what is called the principle of *recapitulation*.

That being said, there can be no questioning or doubting the fact that the sixth and seventh bowl judgments that we read about in Revelation 16 bring us all the way up to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the end of human history as we now know it, and the inauguration of the eternal state.

The First Bowl (16:1-2)

This first bowl judgment is based on the Egyptian plague of “boils breaking out with sores” (Exod. 9:9-11; see the summary in Deut. 28:27,35). Are these “harmful and painful” sores physically literal, or do they represent some form of suffering similar to that in the fifth trumpet (9:4-6,10) where men are psychologically and emotionally tormented by something likened to the sting of a scorpion? Probably both. Of course, this may simply be a metaphorical way of summing up the wide variety of infectious diseases with which mankind has been afflicted throughout the course of human history. May I once again remind you that during the few short years in the middle of the 14th century more than ½ of the entire population on the continent of Europe died from the Bubonic plague or Black Death, as it was known.

In any case, the description of people as those who “bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image” is John’s way of telling us that anyone who worships and serves anyone or anything other than the one true God of the Bible is the object of God’s wrath.

The Second Bowl (16:3)

This bowl, like the second trumpet, is based on Exodus 7:17-21 and the plague that turned the waters of the Nile river to blood. Unlike the trumpet judgment that affected *1/3* of all in the sea, the plague here affects *all*. Thus “the second bowl shows that what can be applied partially can also be applied universally at times throughout the inter-advent age. That is, at times the . . . plague extends throughout the entire earth and not merely part of it” (Beale, 815). In any case, this likely points to the variety of ways in which our oceans and seas have become polluted.

The Third Bowl (16:4-7)

Once again, this bowl judgment is similar to the plague on the Nile River in Exodus 7:17ff. Similar to the third trumpet in 8:10-11, this bowl judgment most likely portrays the suffering and death incurred by those who rely on maritime commerce.

Notice in v. 5 that John refers to “the angel in charge of the waters” (16:5). Could this be a hint that the various elements in the material creation on earth are presided over by particular angelic beings? Possibly. On the other hand, the “angel of the waters” (literally translated) may simply refer to an angelic being who was given sovereignty over the waters by God to carry out his judgment against the economic prosperity that it produced. The precise nature of this judgment (“you have given them blood to drink”) is not stated. Presumably it would be any form of suffering commensurate with that which unbelievers inflicted on believers.

And isn't it interesting that the angel of the waters isn't in the least upset or confused about what is happening and who is behind it. This is God's doing and what he does is an expression of his holiness. True and just are his judgments.

Some have argued that the statement, “it is what they deserve” should be rendered more literally, “They are worthy,” and applies to the “saints and prophets” of v. 6. The idea would be that the latter were innocent of that for which they were persecuted. More likely, however, is that “it is what they deserve” refers to unbelieving oppressors and the justice of God's judgment against them.

Make no mistake about what we are reading here in 16:6. Both the individuals and nations that persecute and kill Christians will be held accountable before God. They may not suffer retributive justice in this life, but they will most certainly face it when they stand before God's throne in the final judgment. And as v. 7 makes clear, you can rest assured that there will be no miscarriage of justice. God's punishment of those who have oppressed and slaughtered his people will be in perfect harmony with truth and justice.

The Fourth Bowl (16:8-9)

If one should ask what sort of suffering does this judgment bring, Revelation 7:16 may provide the answer. There the reward of the righteous in heaven is the reversal of their deprivation while on earth: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat” (7:16; cf. Isa. 49:10; Psalm 121:5-6). Perhaps, then, this judgment in which they are scorched with heat from the sun entails economic hardship resulting in thirst and starvation, for which they blaspheme God.

Notwithstanding the tendency for people to resist the idea that God is the source of such judgments against unbelievers and the resultant suffering, v. 9 makes it clear that it is “God who had power over these plagues” (whether seal, trumpet, or bowl plagues). It bears witness to the

hardness of the human heart in sin that not even the inescapable recognition that God is the source of their misery leads to repentance! We will see this again in v. 11.

The Fifth Bowl (16:10-11)

We are told in Exodus 10:21ff. that one of the plagues that Moses brought against Egypt was complete darkness throughout the land for three days. This plague of darkness was likely a rebuke or refutation of the sun god Ra, of whom Pharaoh was believed to be an incarnation. This fifth bowl judgment is obviously parallel to the plague in Exodus.

The “throne of the beast” most likely symbolizes the seat or center of the world-wide dominion of the great satanic system of idolatry. The “darkness” into which it is plunged is probably spiritual darkness and intellectual confusion that brings chaos to those who were dependent on the world system and its idolatrous ways. Darkness in Scripture almost always symbolizes judgment (1 Sam. 2:9; Amos 5:20; Joel 2:2; Zeph. 1:15), as well as ignorance, wickedness (Ps. 82:5; Prov. 2:13; Eccles. 2:14) and death (Ps. 143:3).

The impact of darkness on the beast’s sovereignty could entail internal strife, rebellion, or loss of political power. A symbolic interpretation of the “darkness” is necessary, insofar as literal darkness of itself cannot account for the intense “pain” that leads to the gnawing of their tongues. The latter could well include both emotional as well as physical anguish, the former in particular being the result of their experience of spiritual “darkness” and the realization of their separation from God.

The Sixth Bowl (16:12-16)

In the OT God’s deliverance of his people was achieved by the drying up of the Red Sea which allowed them to escape Pharaoh’s armies. A similar phenomenon later occurred with the Jordan river, allowing Israel to enter the promised land. It may then be that “the drying up of the river Euphrates to allow the kings of the east to cross over it is the *typological antithesis*” of these earlier deliverances (David Aune, 2:891). The point is that whereas in these two OT cases the water is dried up to make possible the *deliverance* of God’s people from his enemies, in Revelation the water is dried up to facilitate the *attack* on God’s people by his enemies.

On yet another occasion, God’s judgment of historical Babylon in the 6th century b.c. was achieved by the diversion of the Euphrates River which allowed the armies of Cyrus to enter the city and defeat it (see Isa. 11:15; 44:24-28; Jer. 50:33-38; 51:13,36; an event corroborated by the secular historians Xenophon and Herodotus). God raised up Cyrus “from the east” (Isa. 41:2-4,25-27; 46:11-13), “from the rising of the sun” (41:25) and used him to destroy Babylon. It seems clear that the language of Rev. 16:12ff. is based on this familiar OT pattern which John now universalizes. That is to say, what happened to one nation (ancient Babylon) on a local and restricted geographical scale in the OT was a type or foreshadowing of what will happen to all nations on a global and universal scale at the end of history.

The imagery of kings coming from the east, from the vicinity of the Euphrates, was standard OT prophetic language for the enemies of Israel coming to invade and destroy. For those in the Roman Empire, the Euphrates River marked the boundary on the other side of which was their bitter enemy, the Parthians. But for the Jewish people the Euphrates served as the boundary across which their enemies would come, namely the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian invaders. 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; 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 (esp. 46:4,22-23); 50:41-42; Ezek. 26:7-11.

The “kings from the east” therefore does not refer to the armies of Red China. It was a standard expression among the Jewish people for anyone that sought to invade and conquer Israel. You will notice that in v. 14 John refers to “the kings of the whole world” who assemble to wage war against God’s people. So, the “kings from the east” is simply his way of describing the global conspiracy just before Christ’s return in which Satan and his demons try to destroy the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want to mention in passing one intriguing interpretation put forth by Hans La Rondelle in his book *Chariots of Salvation: The Biblical Drama of Armageddon* (Washington, D.C.: Review & Herald Publ. Association, 1987). La Rondelle contends that the “kings from the east” (Rev. 16:12) are in fact the celestial or angelic armies whom Christ himself will lead on that final day in judgment against his enemies. Thus the “kings of the east” are the same as the “armies which are in heaven” (Rev. 19:14) that accompany Jesus at his second coming. He explains: “As the commander of the angelic legions of heaven, Christ will descend from the eastern skies to wage war against the united ‘*kings of the earth*’ and their armies ([Rev. 19:] verse 19). The ‘kings from the East’ thus appear in opposition to the ‘kings of the earth,’ a cosmic contrast between heaven and earth” (119). That’s an intriguing interpretation, but not the correct one, in my opinion.

Whereas v. 12 summarizes the sixth bowl, vv. 13-16 provide the details. Here again we see the unholy “trinity” of Satan, the beast, and the false-prophet (called that for the first time here). Their deceptive influence is portrayed through the imagery of three unclean, obviously demonic, spirits in the form or appearance of ***frogs***, which obviously alludes to the frogs in the Exodus plague (8:1-15).

In ancient Jewish literature frogs were viewed not only as ceremonially unclean but also as agents of destruction. Beale suggests that “the frogs and their croaking represent the confusion brought about by deception” (832). That the frogs are metaphorical is seen from the fact that they “perform signs” (v. 14). In other words, these demonic spirits utilize supernatural phenomena to deceive and thereby influence humans to follow after the beast (cf. 13:11ff.). The primary target of their deception is the kings of the earth, i.e., political leaders and authorities who align themselves with the principles of the beast in opposition to God.

This is a clear and unmistakable reminder once again that the oppression and persecution of Christians all around the globe is energized and driven by Satan and his demonic hosts. But these demonic spirits do more than merely persecute the church. They work to orchestrate a conspiracy among the kings and leaders of all nations designed to utterly destroy the people of God.

Look at v. 14 where they are described as gathering or assembling the kings and nations of the earth “for battle.” But that translation isn’t helpful. It is literally, “for *the* war” (cf. 19:19; 20:8). The use of the definite article (“the”) points to a well-known war, the final, end-of-history, eschatological war often prophesied in the OT between God and his enemies (cf. Joel 2:11; Zeph. 1:14; Zech. 14:2-14).

Verse 15 is a parenthetical exhortation addressed to believers to be vigilant lest they be caught unprepared on that great day. The picture is of a person who stays spiritually awake and alert, clothed in the righteous garments of Christ. For the image of physical nakedness as a symbol of spiritual shame often brought on by idolatry, see Revelation 3:18; 17:16 (cf. also Ezek. 16:36; 23:29; Nahum 3:5; Isa. 20:4). This is God’s counsel to us all: don’t buy into the deceptive lies of the world regarding peace, prosperity, and material success; don’t listen to the false teachers who would have you believe that Christ won’t return because he never rose from the dead in the first place. Be alert! Be watchful! For you don’t know when the Master of the house will appear!

The place of this eschatological war is called **Har-Magedon** (v. 16). “*Har*” is the Hebrew word for “mountain.” This poses a problem for those who believe a literal battle at the literal site is in view, insofar as there is no such place as the Mountain of Megiddo.

Megiddo was itself an ancient city and Canaanite stronghold located on a plain in the southwest region of the Valley of Jezreel or Esdraelon. Although situated on a tell (an artificial mound about 70 ft. high), it can hardly be regarded as a mountain! The valley of Megiddo was the strategic site of several (200, according to Johnson, [155]) significant battles in history (see Judges 4:6-16; 5:19; Judges 7; 1 Samuel 29:1; 31:1-7; 2 Kings 23:29-30; 2 Chron. 35:22-24). It makes sense that the vicinity would become *a lasting symbol for the cosmic eschatological battle between good and evil*. As Mounce accurately notes,

“geography is not the major concern. Wherever it takes place, Armageddon is symbolic of the final overthrow of all the forces of evil by the might and power of God. The great conflict between God and Satan, Christ and Antichrist, good and evil, that lies behind the perplexing course of history will in the end issue in a final struggle in which God will emerge victorious and take with him all who have placed their faith in him. This is Har-Megedon” (302).

To help you understand this, think about how we have come to use the words *Gettysburg* or *Waterloo* or *Dunkirk* to refer not simply to those specific battles but to any major time or event of great conflict, perhaps even a global war. Be it also noted that the plain around Megiddo was

barely large enough for one army to occupy. It could hardly accommodate all the armies of the entire earth.

To put it simply, *Armageddon is prophetic symbolism for the whole world in its collective defeat and judgment by Christ at his second coming. The imagery of war, of kings and nations doing battle on an all-too-familiar battlefield (Megiddo), is used as a metaphor of the consummate, cosmic, and decisive defeat by Christ of all his enemies (Satan, beast, false prophet, and all who bear the mark of the beast) on that final day.* That, by the way, is how human history as we now know it will come to an end. It won't be due to environmental catastrophes or a large meteorite or alien invasions but by the decisive and dramatic re-entrance into history of the King of the Universe, Jesus Christ!

Thus we see that demonic spirits will be unleashed in an unprecedented way at the end of the age to stir up and mobilize the leaders of all nations to unite their forces in an effort to crush the Church and to wipe Christianity from the face of the earth. But to no avail, as we shall see.

The Seventh Bowl (16:17-21)

The imagery of “lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake” points to the final, consummate judgment at the end of the age (see 8:5 and 11:19). Whether or not there will be literal, physical lightning, thunder, and an earthquake is basically irrelevant and unrelated to John's point. After all, how could these natural phenomena cause the downfall and judgment of principles and ideas and unholy opposition in the souls of men to the things of God? John is describing the final judgment that will come against both individual and collective resistance to the kingdom of God and His Lamb. Typical of OT prophetic literature, he uses the imagery of geographical and astronomical upheaval to make the point.

The “great city” (v. 19) is neither historical Jerusalem nor Rome, but trans-historical “Babylon the great,” the trans-cultural, trans-temporal collective embodiment of *all* cities of the earth, together with every political, economic, philosophical, moral, religious, and sociological power-base that opposes Christ and his kingdom (cf. 17:18; 18:10,16,18,19,21).

Additional dissolution of the cosmos is described in v. 20, a passage that is strikingly similar to Revelation 6:14 and 20:11. Is this displacement of islands and mountains 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” often represent Gentile nations or kings (Pss. 72:10; 97:1; Isa. 41:1; 45:16; 49:1,22; 51:5; 60:9; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 26:18; Zech. 2:11).

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; Hab. 1:6; Zech. 14:4. 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?

In v. 21 the Exodus plague of hail is replicated, but with two significant changes: first, not merely one nation (Egypt) but the whole earth suffers from the plague, and second, the size of the hailstones is now said to be “one hundred pounds” (lit., “the weight of a talent”). Cf. also Ezek. 38:19-22. Is this “hailstorm” (and the size of the stones) physically literal, as it was in ancient Egypt, or should it be interpreted symbolically as is the case in vv. 18-20?

Conclusion

As we conclude, I want to return to v. 15 and speak a word of exhortation to those of you who are not Christians. One day you will stand in the presence of your Creator, the Triune God of Scripture: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. ***With what will you be clothed?*** Your righteousness? Your good works? Your good intentions? Do you honestly believe that anything you do in this life is sufficient to secure your place in God’s eternal kingdom? Do you honestly believe that the forgiveness of your sins will come based on your collective “good deeds”? No. Christians will stand in God’s presence then, even as we do now, clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

That can be yours today! Today, before you leave this building, you can be finally and forever clothed in the only righteousness that will avail in the presence of an infinitely holy God. Hear the words of the Apostle Paul, who spoke of his desire to “be found in him [that is, in Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9).